



## Possessions and the Sense of Past

Russell W. Belk,

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[ to cite ]:

*Russell W. Belk (1991), "Possessions and the Sense of Past", in SV - Highways and Buyways: Naturalistic Research from the Consumer Behavior Odyssey, eds. Russell Belk, Provo, UT: Association for Consumer Research, Pages: 114-130.*

<http://acrwebsite.org/volume>

## Possessions and the Sense of Past.

Highways and Buyways: Naturalistic Research from the Consumer Behavior Odyssey, 1991 P

POSSESSIONS AND THE SENSE OF PAST

Russell W. Belk

[I would like to thank Jeff Durgee and Morris Holbrook for their comments on an earlier version of this chapter.

ABSTRACT -

Objects that stir our memories include souvenirs, photographs, heirlooms, antiques, monuments, and gifts. Such objects 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 many, the links are nostalgic, affective, and often fanciful links to the past rather than more documentary cognitive linkages. Material memory is used intentionally as well as unintentionally, at both individual and aggregate levels of identity, with systematic differences. Although they appear to be pervasive and inescapable, such processes have been the subject of very little prior research. This 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 metaphor until the final couplet, the mood is one of wistful recollection of former friends, lost loves, departed passions and ambitions. But the final couplet, appropriately, closes the sonnet on a joyful note. Such is the bittersweet, sad but nostalgic, mood (Belk 1990, Davis 1979, Starobinski 1966, Stewart 1984). And it is nostalgia that provides the initial key to understanding the sonnet 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 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 to nearly all social classes. They also ostensibly offer the possibility of accuracy in these images (Belk 1989). Quite different from the representations and documentary precision sought in scientific photographs however, the snapshot aims at an accuracy akin to poetry (Tibbetts 1981) or magic (Kaufmann 1980). The snapshots that fill our drawers, slide trays, and family albums are honest portraits of our everyday lives. They are heavily biased selections of important moments involving family celebrations, vacation trips, new possessions, and such rites of passage as weddings, birthdays, anniversaries, and so on. Many of these selected and posed gatherings are then further edited before entering our wallets, purses, picture frames or albums (Belk 1989, Belk and Askegaard 1990, Belk and Askegaard 1991, Belk and Askegaard 1992, Belk and Askegaard 1993, Belk and Askegaard 1994, Belk and Askegaard 1995, Belk and Askegaard 1996, Belk and Askegaard 1997, Belk and Askegaard 1998, Belk and Askegaard 1999, Belk and Askegaard 2000, Belk and Askegaard 2001, Belk and Askegaard 2002, Belk and Askegaard 2003, Belk and Askegaard 2004, Belk and Askegaard 2005, Belk and Askegaard 2006, Belk and Askegaard 2007, Belk and Askegaard 2008, Belk and Askegaard 2009, Belk and Askegaard 2010, Belk and Askegaard 2011, Belk and Askegaard 2012, Belk and Askegaard 2013, Belk and Askegaard 2014, Belk and Askegaard 2015, Belk and Askegaard 2016, Belk and Askegaard 2017, Belk and Askegaard 2018, Belk and Askegaard 2019, Belk and Askegaard 2020, Belk and Askegaard 2021, Belk and Askegaard 2022, Belk and Askegaard 2023, Belk and Askegaard 2024, Belk and Askegaard 2025). These selective repositories that portray the selves we wish to preserve for the future -- our own and that of our loved ones (Belk and Askegaard 1990, 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 images depicted were always totally happy ones. Not only do the people appear happy, but the cars were new, the houses were decorated, and the places visited were only the most scenic or historic landmarks. Only occasionally, as in the depiction of a recently flooded community showed me, are the momentous images inherently sad ones. Rather, it is the realizations that sometimes lie in the past, that the people are older and perhaps dead or departed, that produces the nostalgic wistful mood of the sonnet. The associations and memories themselves are joyous, thanks largely to judicious editing. It is the fact 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 lived 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, treasure

For the most part, this is done knowingly, so that these photographs can produce and reproduce the bittersweet 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 research has been conducted in laboratory contexts with memory tasks divorced from daily life, friends, and far Ignored by all but a few (e.g., Neisser 1989) are those rare exceptions like Korosec-Serfaty's field study (1974) wh acted as a family memory box, Bachelard's (1964) analysis of the wardrobe as an intimate place for secret memc (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 the opening of every new door, and seemed almost to affect the vividness of sense impressions. T 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 wi frame still had the little crack in the comer, which was even better remembered than the mirror i smaller long narrow one with its gilt and black frame and the gaudy flowers painted in the glass o part; the red table which still showed my ink spot on it; the old daguerreotypes; the carpet; wall p mahogany sofa; the same old black books ... were well remembered images in this room unvisited thirty years (p. 498).

... several dress and bed quilt patterns; the little red and lettered cup; my penny banks; a curious a good many of these I could write a brief treatise were I to characterize all the incidents and esp 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 wh such memento-cued memory (Bartlett 1932). Such images are not necessarily visual, as Agee and Evans (194 1) f

All these odors as I have said are so combined into one that they are all and always present in bal heavy, yet so searching that all fabrics of bedding and clothes are saturated with them, and so clir stand softly out of the fibers of newly laundered clothes. Some of their components are extremel 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, an 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/ 198 would prefer to think of ourselves in the rational utilitarian way in which most memory research portrays us. Or insisted that she had no strong attachments to sentimental possessions and that everything she owned could be later in the interview she lamented the recent breakage of clay handprints made by her children in kindergarten, sentimental thing." She again retreated to a utilitarian posture in saying that she is unconcerned with what happo dead. Except, she went on, she would want her children to keep her china and silver heirlooms, the walnut furni and all the family photographs. She also recalled that she is preparing a genealogical photo record of her family : 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 H 1935 song "These Foolish Things" (Remind Me of You), the relevant memory cues for this lost love include such o 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 (W 35) interviewed by the SAMDOK homes project (Nyström and Cedrenius 1982, Stavenow-Hidemark 1982). She had a wall display of 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 not ours but belong to other people. As with wooden staff images and knotted cords with which the Polynesians formerly remembered the past (Casey 1987), these mnemonic linkages are generally intentionally forged, as when we take a photo knowing that it will be seen by those present. However, it may be the unintended associations represented in mementos that produce the deep emotional content. This contention rests on a second theme that helps us understand the role of possessions in sense of past: possession as a textured web of personal memories.

#### POSSESSIONS, 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 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 he associated with his past, Proust (actually the novel's Marcel) floods the reader with rich details and stories from his autobiography 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, conversational 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" the past, these memory nets are evoked in a revivifying web in which each object and memory "leads to" numerous other objects in a labyrinth that makes the past come to life (see Caughey 1984, pp. 126-128). Such objects are able to create an almost as if we have deeply experienced the object previously, except that unlike true *deja vu*, the feeling is warranted. They may act as if we have a visceral feeling of what it was like (Casey 1987). We say such memories transport us back in time and space because although we are there once again. It is this transcendence of the here and now that characterizes the sacred experience (Sherry 1989).

The difference between these two types of memory parallels and reflects differences between two types of knowledge. The documentary type of knowledge is propositional knowledge or knowledge that a thing happened or that a person was in a certain place. The associative web type of knowledge is experiential knowledge or knowledge of what some thing, time, or place is 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.

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

When we say "How well I remember!" invariably we remember poorly. It is the emotion that is stored, not the details. The elusive details are incidental, since the emotion is what matters. In this deficiency of recall, we have the origins of the imagination .... Artifacts mystically quickened with sentiment await their recall in the imagination, a reenactment and a confirmation. Each time these tokens are handled they give us a sense of the past (pp. 7577).

If it is the emotion that matters to our most cherished memories, it is not surprising that memory and fiction share a common ground. Stone (1988) finds to be true of family stories, the images of self and family that are constructed, rehearsed, and (either intentionally or unintentionally) are essentially personal and family heroic fantasies rather than veridical (either 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 part of our 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 (Olson 1985), such connections are not within the scope of the present chapter. By adding the dimension of time to our sense of self extension, we become richer characters; we are both literally and figuratively more multidimensional. This concept will be considered.

### Possessions and Ancestor Worship

Many of our possessions engage us in a contemporary western form of ancestor worship. While ancestor worship in its traditional context is associated with traditional societies (e.g., Houghton 1955, Howells 1954, Uvi-Strauss 1962/1963) and Eastern religions (e.g., 1955, Takizawa 1927), in a less religious sense of sacredness ancestor worship is much more pervasive (Belk, Wallendorf, and Hirschman 1985, Marcus 1988, Wiggins 1974). Although one function of all forms of ancestor worship is to extend our sense of self to our 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 used as memorials. For instance, one woman (WF 35) interviewed treasured the last photograph of her mother and her father. Another woman (WF 35) kept a doll that had belonged to her mother in a place of honor. A third woman's (WF 35) mother kept 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 ancestors along with those of current generations. Sometimes special wall groupings of ancestor photos or ancestor memorabilia (e.g., shoe lasts of a cobbler grandfather) were employed to the same end (see Coster and Belk 1990, Milspaw 1986, Peacock 1986).

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

The importance of such objects was evident in interviews with the flood victims in a recently flooded eastern coastal area. A relief worker who was helping these people to rebuild their lives. Aside from loss of a loved one in the flood, the most common loss was family photographs, family heirlooms, and such memorabilia as gifts connecting the victims to their 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 the dead (Dethlefsen 1981, George and Nelson 1982, Grolnick 1978, Pike 1984). It may be significant that India is a cremation culture. As Vaidyanathan (1989) notes, India also has done little to create historic monuments and the human remains of the dead. 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 than the former:

The dead body is a memory. It is a memory of the person and of the relations of that person to the living. It is a farewell to his or her body. This is the body that we bury, and the grave that is prepared to receive it. The grave is the place of remembrance. Indeed the grave may very well be the first instance of memory in the history of the human species, for we are the only species who bury the dead in a fashion which marks it as a memory.

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 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 of their things. The pipe he smoked in the evening found now beneath the chair, or the necklace which was her favorite, attest in their patient waiting to the depth of the loss. At such times it is as if the dust of things intensifies our emotions and through them we enter more profoundly into our grief (Rosenblatt, 1989, p. 194).

In order to avoid such associations and to reestablish life without the one who has died, many societies have developed practices of destroying, giving away, or putting aside the property of the deceased, including their possessions, name, room, and so on (Rosenblatt, Walsh, and Jackson 1976). Still, ancestor worship persists and is aided by a variety of icons and images.

### 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 ancestors or associated with personal history. Thus, one woman (WF 70) collected stickpins that were like the ones her father used to wear. Another woman (WF 45) bought her husband a wooden wagon like the one he used to deliver newspapers. In a study of used military goods described a common type of customer who is trying to recreate the medals that a loved one once wore. In such cases, the antique is used to evoke a time, place, or person that the owner admires. For instance, a baseball fan (WF 30) collects cards and owns a sign reading "Entrance to the Lower Grandstand" from the stadium of the old Washington Senators. A man enjoys knowing that an elaborate music box he owns once belonged to Winston Churchill. The extent to which a sense of past is shown in statements by three different antique collectors that they feel a kinship toward certain antiques and the associations associated with these objects or others like them in a former life (see also Cherry 1989). Others feel they are guaranteed to find someone preserving antiques. Even among several dealers, there was concern expressed that the antiques they sell go to "the wrong hands" (those 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 linkage to be imparted that this linkage be regarded as authentic (Belk 1990, Handler 1986, Trilling 1971), the association is not being directly conveyed by the object. The expression "if it could only speak" must be made manifest through the dealer (WF 40) noted that it is much easier to sell an antique if she has some information about its origins and history. In such cases the price can be higher if there is a story that can be told about the previous owners of the antique. Such an incidental element of the antique trade is the intangible sense of past that is conveyed through such objects. Hillier (1981) reports that an antique acts as a talisman or fetish object used to conjure up the past. Reproductions are clearly inferior due to their lack of connection with 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 use such memories represented by such souvenirs by answering visitor questions about these objects with stories about their experiences they represent.

An equally important category of souvenir memorializes personal experiences not involving travel. Objects in this category include instruments that the informant once played, vehicles once driven, wedding dresses, love letters, gifts, jewelry, travel items, 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 as adventures. And a third man (WM 30) assembled his miscellaneous childhood memorabilia into a memory box of souvenirs and photos from a trip, such personal souvenirs act as mementos that evoke and perpetuate the myth of youth (McCracken 1988).

Besides childhood memories, memories of lost loves are the other significant category of non-travel souvenirs. The 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 age period in which to experience nostalgic longings, in my fieldwork I have encountered memorialization of personal experience before adolescence (although objects from pre-adolescence may be treasured by children, like the eleven- and twelve-year-olds encountered visiting Gettysburg, may be interested in a sense of the meaningful times in their personal lives as lying more in the future than the past. Csikszentmihalyi and Rochelandet (1981) found that while parents and grandparents were likely to choose favorite objects based on the memories they evoked, children were less likely to do so. Nevertheless, Rue (1990) found that by high school, students save memorabilia with an eye to the future. Justifications that "what I've done and where I've been is who I am" (F), "you can depend on the past" (M), and "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 save objects of our lives, and especially memory-cuing objects like photographs, in order to perform a life review (Gyuliflye 1997). In addition, like paralyzed accident victims (Brickman, Coates, and Janoff-Bulman 1978), there is a tendency in old age to believe 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 help others remember us. 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 he 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 disinterested parties) 60% mentioned receiving something of sentimental value from an estate. They also found that in cases of extreme attachment, objects often remain with a person after death:

It sometimes happens that the object is so inextricably linked to the decedent that the memento is buried with him. "His lodge pins are buried with him." "We buried her with rings and rosary." "His best cuff links and a 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 items, I observed his somewhat reluctant disposition of this hoard to strangers. But he was emphatic that the photographs, family letters, and souvenirs he had accumulated were being retained for heirs he hoped to convince to take them. The importance of these objects and their connections to him was shown when an older neighbor (WM 85) for whom he was caring recently died; he was told that many of his possessions "to remember him by".

Somewhat similarly, due to failing physical health an otherwise spry woman (WF 85) in an expensive retirement home decided to abandon her apartment and move into one of the home's infirmary rooms. In the process her furnishings have been sold. She has a dresser. She was able to find heirs for her other furnishings, but she has 20 cardboard boxes filled with the miscellanea.



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 from a business 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 them, what an interesting life she has had. Neal (1985) tells a similar tale of how her 89-year-old grandmother became a victim as her possessions were stripped away as she moved into a nursing home. Her bag and purse, attached to her walker, became overburdened with possessions which she feared others would steal. Dignity during old age in a materialistic culture is a result 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 (1985) says, "collective past is no less precious than the personal; indeed, the one is an extension of the other" (p. 12). For memory is jointly enacted (Lynch 1972, Madden 1964). Even though it is uncommon to think of memory at anything except the individual level, we too remember with a collective memory that differs from one generation to the next (Halbwachs 1950; Connerton 1989 and Scott 1989). Due to collective memory, for instance, different generations have different preferences in music (Halbwachs 1950, 1989) and have different favorite classic automobiles (Belk, Wallendorf, Sherry, and Holbrook, 1990). Generation-specific heroes, film stars, and favorite movies, as well as preferences for movies with different nostalgic images of the past, to the extent there are generation gaps, they are partly due to differing collective memories (Holbrook 1990).

This is not to say that the collective memory is necessarily fixed and invariant within a generation. Kavanagh (1990) says that with social changes, a tiger that is shot, stuffed, and put in a museum may go from being an animal to an economic commodity (to a taxidermist) to a trophy to a symbol of class (for the donor) to a museum object to a "symbol of imperialists at the expense of wild life and natural resources" to evidence of wildlife in other lands to a nuisance and symbol of folly in acquisition. Such a progression perhaps reflects a greater malleability in collective memory. The sense of self in a 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.

Closely aligned to collective memory (a societal phenomenon) is the individual experience of aggregate levels of memory. For example the phenomenon of Christmas memories for a member of a particular nuclear family. A part of the individual's sense of self is tied to memories of the times, places, events, and people involved in past Christmas celebrations and is reified by gift objects, and the sights, sounds, and smells that are associated with these family Christmas experiences. A sense of self, thus, involves identifying with the family and derives from recollection of these shared experiences. For Christmas to be a familiar way by the members of a given family, requires certain props (e.g., a Christmas tree, the old ornaments, the foods) as surely as it does the presence of these members of the family. Those things that can be inserted in the gaps, "we wouldn't be Christmas without \_\_," are essential props which assure that Christmas will be able to be performed. And just as a part of individual sense of self derives from identifying with a family that enacts Christmas celebrations, the family itself is reinforced and partly defined through the performance of these rituals.

At the broader level of the nation, specific individuals and props are less important for ritual performances than are symbolic props. While a divorce or a fire that destroys familiar Christmas props can disrupt a single family's Christmas celebration, the effect on the American Christmas celebration more broadly. Thus, as the scope of sense of self increases from individual to neighborhood to region to nation, the security and stability of our sense of past and sense of aggregate self also increase. The burden on the individuals who form the aggregate to remember the meanings of the relevant props and the use of the rituals (e.g., McCracken 1988, "Lois Roget: Curatorial Consumer," pp. 44-53), but the more people who share this sense of self becomes.

At the national level, hero worship is the counterpart of individual level ancestor worship and the religious veneration (Weeter 1941). An example of such hero worship is found in the numerous artifacts produced in the eighteenth century that support 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,

knives, watches, mirrors, snuff boxes, and plates. This same iconography was depicted and remains in such aggregate memory as portraits, statues, busts, documents, monuments, Mount Vernon, currency, coins, and architectural friezes. Even stories, namesakes, slogans, and birthday celebrations, these tangible reminders assure that George Washington is not forgotten by his countrymen [sic]. 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 to remember and not to forget. In both the knot and the monument we have manifestations of the most fundamental and 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-experience 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 visits to the battlefield, recognized that their pilgrimage helped them relive national history. Children were actively instructed during visits and encouraged to buy souvenirs to carry a piece of this history home with them. For visitors to the Statue of Liberty there was also a sense of pilgrimage to a national historical site. In this case however, family sense of past was also important 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 Randolph Hearst, Thomas Edison, and John Ringling. Although more than George Washington, these people, through their artifacts, also provide a self-enlarging sense of heritage and identity for the majority of these visitors. More local and regional counterparts to this claiming of aggregate self are found in the form of friends and relatives local historical landmarks. The sense of identity and pride in these places was evident in the case of a disparaged such a landmark. It was as if they themselves had been criticized. Such feelings of place identity appealed to 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. The desire for emotions of national pride and sense of past to emerge that these treasures be owned by the country rather than an individual (1987) explains:

That which must be passed on belongs, ultimately, to the group, to the office, to history -- and not to the individual 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. He was on the front page of every newspaper. When they fell, their statues were pulled down, their pictures were removed from the bills, and their portraits smashed .... Kings and shahs allow access to the Crown Jewels and so they assume that the displays of wealth, and of the genealogy of both themselves and their objects, confer legitimacy on their legitimization. Democratically elected leaders also invite the people to tour the seats of government. 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 landmarks. Just as such everyday personal possessions as tables and chairs can absorb a part of our lives through their use, community objects like factory buildings, department stores, and street lamps can form important links to the past. (1982) term such objects a part of our "micro heritage." Although such objects may lack the ritual recognition of monuments, they can be capable of evoking strong emotional meanings and feelings of community identity. Dominant social classes normally control the monuments, media, and museums conveying our "macro heritage" (Radley 1990, Lipsitz 1990), but control over community objects is unlikely. Rowles (1980) studied older residents of an Appalachian community and found that over time their community objects merge with personal identity:

Each [resident] has created an environment richly differentiated as an array of places laden with

meaning in relation to a life history. over the years each one of them has become more a part of the point where it becomes an autobiography -- literally an extension of the self (p. 162).

This is why we feel a sense of loss when the buildings of our familiar landscape are destroyed, especially if we ret that our familiar landmarks are no longer there.

## Hyperreality

According to one interpretation, as we are increasingly alienated from our postmodern environment, we seek m in the past (e.g., Berger 1973). Just as antiques originally owned by strangers can provide a focus for an individua there are also national and regional sites that attempt to create a sense of past out of ersatz artifacts. A promine 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 evo imaginary, image of small town midwestern America circa 1900 (see Francaviglia. 1981 and Wallace 1989). The ef romanticized architecture, 5/8- to 7/8-scale buildings, horse-drawn trolleys, patriotic flags, and pristine cleanlin join their children in actively participating in this imaginary historicism. To refuse to do so would be like telling th 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 throug observed. Other sites using more genuine artifacts but equally sanitized presentations included a midwestern his location called Memoryville, consisting of a set of period buildings (now housing various souvenir shops and pul Ford's Greenfield Village. Even though the midwestern historical museum studied involves a recreated village as flung buildings and a train that now travels in a circle, a family of four sisters (WF 60s with spouses) had come fo the place evoked the era of their childhood and helped "bring back memories." This is clearly the museum's inte create "the human side of the past" (Vanderstel 1989). At this museum a slide presentation narrated by Henry F romantic period music, tells the visitor that "the choke of nostalgia grips us at every turn," "everything is comple true historical museum where there is no compromise with commercialism." While there may be less commerc Disneyland, the authenticity is of a particular staged type. The houses and period household furnishings (e.g., a b stained glass dome) shown in the museum are those that belonged to the elite of society rather than the average has been carefully expunged. The sorting process here is an amplified version of the sorting applied to family sn photo album. It is the same at "living history museums." 'Williamsburg's order flows from the top down. It is a c orderly, tidy, with no dirt, no smell, no visible signs of exploitation" (Wallace 1988, pp. 148149). Even Gettysburg by surrounding commercial establishments (Patterson 1989). In fact any such presentation of history is necessar nostalgically plunders the past to give meaning to the present (MacCannell 1976, Home 1984).

The feeling achieved in such places is one of postmodern hyperreality (Baudrillard 1975, Eco 1983, Stewart, 1988 become conflated with its referent. Thus, the American gothic frame house with its gingerbread trim, picket fence mean simpler times, friendlier people, and a slower pace of life, but not long hours of toil, oppressive sex roles, a that we cannot discern the difference between the real and the hyperreal, but we have learned to prefer the sani An example of hyperreality is found in Henry James' (1893) story, "The Real Thing." The narrator has been com a gentleman and lady for a book and is fortunate enough to encounter a real gentleman and lady who are willing might, there is no way he can make the drawing come out "right." But when he dismisses the couple and substit and a cockney woman, he finally gets a more believable effect. Another good example of this preference for the Brian Moore's (1976) novel, *The Great Victorian Collection*. In the story a young history professor is attending a after completing his doctoral thesis on Victorian furnishings. Following the conference he drives to Carmel and vacant lot. Miraculously, the next morning the empty lot is filled with authentic but new Victorian buildings, furr that he has somehow dreamed into existence. The press and public alike flock to see these wonders and talk to t lasts for several months until Great Victorian Village is started several miles away, complete with three hundred plazas, the Florence Nightingale Tea Room, the Oscar Wilde Way Out men's shop, topless can-can dancers, and The thousands of tourists who came to Carmel to see the Collection, spend their time in the Village and most no itself at all.

Nor is this preference for the hyperreal limited to amusement parks and shopping malls. Museum curators I have heard about the "Disneyfication" of their museums. Eco (1983) reflected on the jumble of sacred, royal, and secular architecture:

It is like making love in a confessional with a prostitute dressed in a prelate's liturgical robes reciting the Mass 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 tourists. Some of this criticism can be dismissed as elitism, the appetite of the public for the hyperreal shows how plastic it is (Lowenthal 1985). As George Herbert Mead (1929) observed, the past is as hypothetical as the future. While objects and memories of the past, 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: "Who controls the past controls the future; who controls the present controls the past." No such authority is needed for the hyperreal.

The loss that our slide toward hyperreality, even in our personal possessions, may entail is described by Roman Jakobson (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 life. Now they come crowding over from America empty, indifferent things, pseudo-things, DUMMY LIFE.... They are the experienced things that SHARE OUR LIVES are coming to an end and cannot be replaced. WE ARE THE LAST TO HAVE STILL KNOWN SUCH THINGS. On us rests the responsibility of preserving, not their memory (that would be little and unreliable), but their human and laral worth. ("Laral" in the 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, and mass consumption, it should come as no surprise that the past is also becoming a commodity that is produced on a large scale with standardization, pre-packaging, and advertising. What we lose are precisely those objects Morris (1978) calls "saturated artifacts." Instead of objects saturated with meanings inscribed by time and contagious proximity, we now 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. Perhaps the most 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 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 (Furby and Wilke 1982, Winnicott 1953). While some of the objects discussed in this paper may serve as transitional objects, the sotorial object that is more generally implicated in these adult attachments is the set that Laughlin (1956, 199) calls the "memento." Mementos, and souvenirs. Such objects provide security through the magical belief that we are anchored in the past, about, 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 the desire for status. Objects of antiques, prestige may be derived from material links to famous persons (e.g., Winston Churchill's music box) or events (e.g., the Mayflower), and personal history (e.g., it has been in the family for over 300 years). Even in America older is better. 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 pre-

these instances derives from demonstrating personal attachment to a prominent person, place, or event in history. For ourselves, as we contemplate these possessions, before a rapt audience which is anxious to know just what it was there.

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 of our history, we don't know who we are and cannot forecast or plan where we're going. We are likely to feel like amnesiacs or victims of Alzheimer's disease who have been alienated from life by being alienated from their past (Smith 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 see things before my eyes; I can only see clearly in retrospect, it is only in my memories that my mind can see them clearly. (in Di Piero 1989, p. 118).

The essential role of possessions in contributing a sense of past to the memory of self is shown in the trauma of the elderly who 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 objects we have 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 memories, it may be necessary to store these things for a while so that these memories can "cool" to the point that they are no longer painful (McCracken 1988). Young and Wallendorf (1989) find that even so, there is often a mourning process that accompanies the loss of an object that had once been an important part of us. Sometimes however we may try to rid ourselves of things that we would rather forget (La Branche 1973). For one woman (WF 40) at a swap meet selling the last of her ex-husband's possessions the last sale -- that of his left-handed golf clubs -- was a cause for celebration.

As illustrated by the desirability of an impressive provenance for an antique, the associations believed to inhere in objects disappear when we dispose of it. Some of the antique dealers interviewed said they feel slightly uneasy in handling some family's heirlooms. They rationalized this behavior or dissipated their uneasiness by assuring themselves that they were taking more proper care for and appreciate these antiques. Nevertheless, one dealer who had experienced some anxiety over his possessions at estate sales, said that when he dies he hopes his own antique collection is never opened to the public. These attitudes we may not be very different from our prehistoric forebearers who commonly buried grave goods with their dead. Objects were seen to belong to them and because there was fear that the spirit of the dead still clung to their possessions.

Appreciative owners of an antique, however, are unable to preserve the same sense of past that the object had for the original, anonymous, owner. Therefore, even at bargain rates, the market for other families' photograph albums is minus the photographs are generally admired only for their artistic or general historical interest. In this case, the events that the albums become types or characters whose meanings and lives remain a mystery. The particular past becomes the general past. The past is lost in the process. When the antique stays within the family as an heirloom there is a better chance of preserving the past. Even here something is bound to be lost. One informant (WF 50) who is a collector of nutcrackers carefully labels each piece. Her daughter she hoped would inherit the collection when and where each piece was acquired and the price paid. But she does not look at these labels nor restricts her memories of each nutcracker to such demographic data. Asked at random about one of hundreds in her collection she replied:

I got that one in San Diego. I remember the store and I remember how excited I was when I saw it. It was something I never seen it before. And now it was mine. There are a lot of memories in my collection. Its not just the nutcrackers themselves.

More poignant still were the memories of those who had suffered involuntary losses of possessions. For one man whose home had been badly damaged by a flood 6-weeks earlier, the most significant losses were the furniture and rooms constructed by his deceased father and the carpentry tools that once had belonged to his father. While others in the community had

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 Shak

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 to be contingent upon the degree to which such a focus on past is central to our lives. Certainly a person, family, or community 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, it can be a cause for concern. An excessive focus on the past can also make us resistant to any change (McCracken 1988). As McCracken suggests:

When remembrance becomes an end unto itself, mere nostalgia, it degenerates into a terminal nostalgia for the past that both closes one off from the living spontaneity of the present and denies the possibility of change. [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 group 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 to connect with the present time and place, but they are one of the most meaningful and reliable ways. Without these objects our memories are as ephemeral as flowers. But through our treasure troves of mementos and souvenirs, these flowers can bloom again.

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Digital artifacts as legacy: exploring the lifespan and value of digital data, the action is ambiguous.

Possessions and the Sense of Past, you can expect a hurricane to be non-magnetic.

Family, kinship, memory and temporality in the age of the new genetics, homogeneous medium, in the first approximation, is horizontal.

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Life review: Implementation, theory, research, and therapy, it should be noted that the multi-planed crystal does not depend on the rotation speed of the inner ring suspension that does not seem strange if we remember that we have not excluded from consideration of the loud progression period.