

Teaching the Value of “Stuff:” Appraising Material Evidence Public Programs

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In his 1931 presidential address to the American Historical Association (AHA), Carl Becker connected the burgeoning academic field of history to the public. Becker's *Everyman His Own Historian* presents some key themes about the study of history. In relating the study and understanding of history as an everyday, common occurrence with the public through the “everyman,” Becker's text acknowledges history as an accessible and present element in society. Becker notes, “In every age, history is taken to be a story of actual events from which a significant meaning may be derived.”¹ That meaning, Becker argues, is based on, and inferred from, available records and remains of the past to professional academics and the public. Such records and remains consist of written history and everyday objects or artifacts: known as material culture.

Eight decades later, Becker's address to AHA remains a key document in the field as a historical text for the public and academics - as well as an insight into popular culture. Specifically, Becker's words foreshadowed a lasting and intimate public interest with the history of everyday objects and common artifacts. While the “everyman” has access to written accounts of history in the form of public archives, libraries and the traditional history textbook, the most accessible history are the physical objects or artifacts around him. Specifically, the “everyman,” or the public today, looks to personal artifacts and family heirlooms as a primary source of history.

When it comes to interpreting material culture as the past, multiple institutions aid the public in this action. Cultural centers, libraries, schools, universities and even garage sales allow the public to engage with artifacts, objects, and heirlooms. Most tellingly however, museums and auction houses provide clear platforms for the public to view and

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¹ Carl Becker. “Everyman His Own Historian.” *The American Historical Review*. Vol. 37, no. 2, p. 221–36. http://www.historians.org/info/aha_history/clbecker.htm. Accessed 27 October 2011.

interact with material culture. These two dramatically different institutions work to engage the public and relate history through objects. Auction house and museum sponsored public programs highlight current methodologies in historical interpretation and education about material culture for public audiences. This paper works to introduce recent cases of collections-based public programs and the resulting issues and consequences facing the public as the “everyman” historian and the involved institutions.

Perhaps the most visual example of America’s continuing love affair with everyday material culture may be viewed on—where else—television. Current programs showcase a dramatic interest of the public in popular and accessible history, specifically through objects and artifacts accessible to the “everyman.” Current programs such as *The Antiques Road Show* (PBS), *Storage Wars* (A&E), *Cash in the Attic* (BBC), *Treasure Hunters* (NBC), *Buried Treasure* (FOX) and *The Great Big American Auction* (ABC) highlight the popularity, variety and multi-network interest in object-based history.²

Tellingly, the programs emphasize the obscurity or ordinary nature of the objects presented by show participants, highlighting an audience connection to the broadcasted material. In addition to creating that connection with televised material, the programs all emphasize the cash value of items presented. With the placement of a dollar sign on history, such television programs showcase the valuable and economic aspects of material culture, while also highlighting the fickle nature of antiquities in an uncertain financial market. This uncertainty, paired with monetary value, adds a game show element to such programs. *Fortune* magazine highlights that, “It’s not all about the money. Part of *Roadshow’s* appeal is the education viewers get when one of the country’s top appraiser’s reveals, in minute detail the specific reasons for the estimate he’s about to give.”³ Essentially, such programs present a “fascinating look at history, fine arts, and human nature, all wrapped up in the guise of a treasure hunt.”⁴

Such television programs target a large demographic. Long-time favorites such as PBS’s *Antiques Road Show* (the British series first debuted in 1979) note the longevity and time tested interest in educational entertainment, or edutainment, featuring artifacts. New programs such as ABC’s *The Great Big American Auction* feature evolving public tastes and attitudes towards antiquities. Such programs’ material serves to both persuade and illustrate popular tastes, fashions

² Lisa Long, “All Buy Ourselves at Household Auctions,” *Acts of Possession: Collecting in America* ed. Leah Dilworth, (Rutgers, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2003), 244.

³ *Ibid.*, 243.

⁴ *Ibid.*

and interests. Further, such television programs provide creative inspiration to program designers and educators at an array of institutions.

Popular television serves as a clear indicator of public interest and helps highlight the continuing fascination with personal artifacts and objects. Beyond the small screen however, studies and scholarship illuminate the relationship between the public and the material past. In their popular nation-wide survey and resulting study in *Presence of the Past*, historians Roy Rosenzweig and David Thelen found that nearly every American citizen “deeply engages the past” with an emphasis on the fact that the average American is most engaged in the study and history of their own family.⁵ While some Americans shy away from the idea of spending an afternoon in a museum or research library, or even pursuing history as a route of higher academic learning, many, the study found, enjoyed family archival projects. Such projects include scrapbooking, creating and studying family trees, and oral history through storytelling and anecdotes.⁶ In interacting with such projects and activities, individuals act out Becker’s idea of the “everyman as historian.”

The study of material culture is a primary way in which the public engages in family history. Objects that highlight family history include photographs, slides, furniture, jewelry, and other heirloom objects such as the family Bible, paintings, and antiques. The embedded provenance that artifacts carry with participants on such television programs adds an emotional charge and spark that engages at-home viewers and brings “electric” dollar signs for television networks. Popular programs such as *Antiques Road Show* and *The Great Big American Auction* feature the examination of personal family heirlooms often stored in dusty attics or forgotten closet corners.

The appeal of material culture to the “everyman” historian is clear. Material culture serves as a tangible connection or link to history, acting, in a way, as a time traveling device. Material culture that remains in a family in the form of artifacts and heirlooms enables history to journey generation to generation. Such historical objects or antiques carry countless stories, just waiting to be discovered and shared. In many ways, “Intimate fictions are made tangible through material objects.”⁷ Such fictions take the form of family anecdotes; tall tales and legends may often be rooted in truth.

Popular interest and academic interest in material culture have not always overlapped. Material culture as an academic study is a relatively

⁵ Roy Rosenzweig and David Thelen, *The Presence of the Past: Popular Uses of History in American Life* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998) 22.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Long, “All Buy Ourselves at Household Auctions,” 243.

new vein of history. Around the time of the bicentennial, a growth of academic interest and concentration in material culture studies developed. Brown University introduced the course American Material Culture in the early 1970s, focusing primarily on colonial sites such as Plymouth Colony.⁸ Since then, the traditional emphasis of material culture research by historians has been focused on the makers of objects rather than the users⁹ As objects or artifacts in a personal collection, heirlooms and antiques often mean more to the “everyman” historian as material evidence of a user, or ancestor. Additionally, such objects work to illustrate ideas, movements and themes in history beyond an individual or maker. The lure of material culture may be compared to a childhood game of “show and tell,” as the elements of that game and of historical storytelling are narrative aspects public programs and television networks take note of.

In an effort to tap into the mainstream interest of material culture as popular personal history, many public programs target the “everyman” historian. Many museums and auction houses find themselves teaming up to create public programs focusing on material culture. These public programs are appearing with increasing frequency across the United States; The Rockwell Museum of Western Art in in Corning, New York presented a public program in November 2011 that invited Heritage Auction experts to greet and interact with museum patrons. Primarily stationed in Dallas, Texas, Heritage Auctions is the third largest auction house in the world, and is known as the largest “collectibles” auction house.¹⁰ Officially dubbed the museum’s “Appraisal Day,” the Rockwell Museum designed a program allowing museum patrons to bring in family heirlooms, antiques, and the odds and ends of their attics for Heritage experts to examine. At the event, Heritage Auctions appraisers offered an estimated insurance value and auction appraisal for each piece brought in. A museum spokesperson noted that “With a 10 a.m. start time, we saw a line form by 8:30 a.m. With popular programs on television like 'Antiques Roadshow,' 'Pawn Stars' and others, we knew this would be a popular event.”¹¹

⁸ James Deetz. *In Small Things Forgotten: An Archeology of Early American Life*. Expanded and Revised Ed. Doubleday Dell: New York, 1996. X.

⁹ Thomas J. Schlereth. “History Museums and Material Culture,” *History Museums in the United States: A Critical Assessment* ed. Warren Leon and Roy Rosenzweig (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1989), 305. For further information about the development of material culture as an academic subject, see this article.

¹⁰ “About Heritage,” Heritage Auctions. <http://www.ha.com>. Accessed 24 October 2011.

¹¹ Jeff Murray, “Town and Country: Museum's appraisal day feels like Rockwell's 'Roadshow'” *Star Gazette*, 19 November 2011. <http://www.stargazette.com/article/20111119/NEWS01/111190359/Town-Country->

Rockwell Museum's first "Appraisal Day" was such a success that museum educators and public programmers on staff are currently considering a follow up program or other possibilities that parallel the patron experience. The hands on nature of the public program, the family history, and the monetary value established by the auction appraisers all combined to a successful event.

This public program designed by Rockwell Museum, with the intent to increase patronage by tapping into the television demographic, educated the public on material culture and invited experts outside of their institution. The Rockwell Museum is following a common public programs path in the museum field today.

Across the country, similar public programs occurred in 2011. Located about sixty miles west of Chicago, the DeKalb Public Library teamed up with a freelance appraiser to design a public program that mirrors Rockwell's "Appraisal Day." A large part of the community, the eighty-year old library teamed up with local historical societies to design a program based on *Antiques Road Show*.¹² The library invited an independent appraiser, who had worked with the PBS program, to serve as the guest expert. Elsewhere, the South Carolina State Museum designed a similar program with their own "Museum Roadshow." The museum called for patrons to bring in a variety of items and cited that the public program was "inspired by PBS' 'Antiques Roadshow,' and detailed that the program offered "informal (verbal) appraisals of a variety of objects."¹³ Further, the program at the South Carolina State Museum worked to integrate museum staff as the appraisers on hand, as opposed to working with an auction house or appraising firm. The program additionally allowed museum curators to discuss material culture care.

Further signs of popular public programs are endless, and at every turn institutions are hopping on the bandwagon. Such programs work beyond merely free educational events and often allow museums to present programs as an annual benefit. The Franklin G. Burroughs Chapin Art Museum in Myrtle Beach, South Carolina presents an annual appraisal public program specifically designed as a museum fundraiser. Combining education, entertainment and an institutional fundraiser, the art museum works to embody its mission statement of engaging "our community and visitors through unique exhibitions and interactive,

Museum-s-appraisal-day-feels-like-Rockwell-s-Roadshow?odyssey=nav%7
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¹² "Antique Appraisal to be held at DeKalb Library," *The Daily Chronicle*. 28 November 2011.

¹³ "Museum Roadshow," Programs & Events, South Carolina State Museum. <http://www.museum.state.sc.us/events/roadshow.aspx>. Accessed 26 October 2011.

educational and creative programs for people of all ages.”¹⁴ The annual fundraiser “Art, Antiques & Treasures” is an elegant, black tie affair designed by museum programmers to invite multiple and diverse appraiser firm representatives to lend an expert eye over patrons’ artifacts, objects, and heirlooms.

In addition to working with museums and other cultural intuitions like libraries, auction houses, and appraisal firms design their own freestanding public programs as well. With its main branch located in Boston, Massachusetts, Skinner Auctions & Appraisers hosts annual “Appraisal Days” or “Appraisal Open Houses” and “What’s it Worth?” events geared toward the general public. Such programs work to target individuals or intuitions that previously have not worked with or partnered with Skinner, thus promoting the auction house to a larger possible clientele. Skinner details its variety of programs as follows:

Appraisal Days and “What’s it Worth?” events provide cultural institutions and non-profit organizations with an entertaining educational experience for their membership or other select audience. During a “What’s it Worth?” event, a Skinner appraiser will discuss and evaluate an assortment of objects before an audience. During an Appraisal Day, participants meet individually with the Skinner appraiser and receive a verbal assessment of their material.¹⁵

Heritage Auctions, the company that served as a guest consult for the Rockwell Museum, may be becoming the most visible of auction companies to the public at large. While Christies and Sotheby’s are a bit like the Godfather of auction houses with well-recognized names, Heritage Auctions is directly teaming up with ABC’s *The Great Big American Auction* serving as the primary auction house consultant for the new program. While shows such as *The Antiques Roadshow* call upon a diverse range of auction houses, firms and independent specialists, *The Great Big American Auction* marks a departure from this. Hosted by the personable Ty Pennington (whose television personality is best attached the ABC program *Extreme Makeover: Home Edition*, where he frequently yells at buses to move and reveal a rehabilitated home for a deserving family), *The Great Big American Auction* travels the country to create “A room full of potential buyers outbidding each other in a suspenseful standoff.” The program emphasizes, “Random objects bought for mere dollars will go for hundred of thousands, as their lucky owners lives

¹⁴ “Art, Antiques Appraisal Event to Benefit Art Museum, Jan 22,” *Alternatives: A News Magazine*, (5 January 2011).

¹⁵ “Appraiser Open House” Event Information, Skinner Auctions & Appraisers. <http://www.skinnerinc.com/resources/events.php> Accessed 4 November 2011.

forever change.”¹⁶

The consequences and possible social implications of material culture popular public programs are many. Implications affect not only the public and related institutions, but also field professionals such as museum educators and programmers. Further, the consequences of popular public programs are far reaching into classrooms and family rooms, reaching out to society in variety of ways. The long-range reach of such public program directly affects the popular view of material culture as a key primary source of history for the public, or “everyman historian.” Additionally, the shared interest of museum and auction houses raises a fair number of issues for the public.

Museums and auction houses often walk fine lines when it comes to discussing the monetary value of their collections and material for the auction block. Specifically, institutions carry a large degree of swaying power in their selection and use of a specific appraiser or firm. As prominent institutions in society, the public looks to museums and auction houses as valid resources of information about the value of material culture. The importance of item appraisal is clear for general monetary as well as insurance reasons. Legal disclaimers and printed statements from involved institutions and organizations make clear the limitations of specific individuals or organizations. The Smithsonian’s Museum Conservation Institute (MCI) presents an example:

MCI does not make warranty, expressed or implied; does not assume any legal liability or responsibility for the accuracy, completeness, or usefulness or any information or process disclosed; nor represents that its use would not infringe privately owned rights.¹⁷

Another consequence of material culture programs is the association of a monetary value on history. Such public programs emphasize the monetary value of material culture, painting the museum patron as a social consumer and placing a price tag on history. In addition to enjoying and engaging in personal family history, patrons of museums and potential buyers at auction houses are conditioned to consider the past in dollar signs through museum sponsored “Appraisal Days.” In the first century B.C., Publius Syrus stated “Everything is worth what its purchaser will pay for it.”¹⁸ Current market research outlines the following factors as key value-determining aspects of an object or artifact: artist’s (or maker’s) reputation, rarity of an item,

¹⁶ “The Great Big American Auction.” ABC Shows. <http://abc.go.com/shows/the-great-big-american-auction>. Accessed 15 November 2011.

¹⁷ “Artifact Appraisals.” Smithsonian, Museum Conservation Institute. http://www.si.edu/mci/english/learn_more/taking_care/appraisal.html. Accessed 11 November 2011.

¹⁸ Tom McNulty. *Art Market Research: A Guide to Methods and Sources* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2006), 5.

condition of the object, artifact's provenance or background, and additional outside factors such as a collector's specific need or desires.¹⁹ Out of these contributing factors, family heirlooms or artifacts that have been in a family for multiple generations, highlights the personal value.

At times, the value of personal artifacts compared to museum objects is difficult for the public – or “everyman” – to envision. This difficulty is often what creates the surprise and shock at discovering an unexpected value of a family heirloom at such a public program. The reason for this is that often objects in museums are often elevated “into sacred objects” similar to “ecclesiastical property,” with the museum's role as a temple of sorts to “man's enlightenment.”²⁰ This ideology fits in with a very traditional view of museums as cloistered buildings of higher learning and elite area of knowledge.

A further consequence of material culture programs is an increased motivation in selling, buying, or collecting material objects. Not only does this interest create potential new clients for auction houses or appraisers directly involved in specific public programs, but this interest also becomes electronic via the Internet. The role of online auctions, or cyber auctions, is increasing as an important route for both potential collectors and auctioneers. Cyber auctions, such as eBay, work to create situation similar to a videogame atmosphere with multiple players competing for goods and various skills (funds) while cyber auctions allow bidders to partake in auctions across the nation or world. While there is an easy and accessible nature to these electronic auctions, they prevent physical contact with the material for sale – bidders are unable to touch, smell or magnify objects to the same degree as they would in person in some cases.²¹

Aside from an interest in buying, selling, or collecting online, a consequence of such public programs is an interest in auctions in general. Popular imagination of an auction is ripe with comparisons. Bonaffee, a French collector, compared auction bidders to cannibals – “When each closeted together, they devour each other.”²² Aside from a cannibalistic atmosphere, the auction house world is often seen as a competitive and very interactive sport:

Bidding at auction is the most exhilarating of all sports. It matures young men in a few seconds and instantly rejuvenates the moribund. It

¹⁹ Ibid., 11.

²⁰ Tom L. Freudenheim. “Museum Collecting, Clear Title, and the Ethics of Power,” in *Ethics and the Visual Arts*, ed. Elaine A. King and Gail Levin. (New York: Allworth Press, 2006), 49-63. 50.

²¹ Long, “All Buy Ourselves at Household Auctions,” 251

²² Charles Hamilton *Auction Madness: An Uncensored Look Behind the Velvet Drapes of the Great Auction Houses* (New York: Everest House, 1981), 15.

provides all the blood-pounding excitement of a real battle. And into the veins of even the most generous collector it injects the addictive drug of rabid greed.²³ The athletic, and at times theatrical nature of auctions appeals to a wide range audience as participants and observers.

A further factor to be considered when examining material culture programs is the motivation behind the various intuitions. With different motivations, the formats and presentation of public programs sponsored by different institutions and organizations understandably differ. The American Association of Museums (AAM) defines a museum as an institution that presents a “unique contribution to the public by collection, preserving and interpreting the things of this world.”²⁴ In their mission statements, museums stress the process of interpretation through exhibits and public programs events. With a main goal of education and an oftentimes non-profit setting, public programs designed by museums work primarily to educate and increase patronage and public interest in the museum’s mission statement.

Auction houses on the other hand present an entirely different mentality in their public programs. Pundits of the for-profit nature of auction houses cry out, “Art and history, beauty and culture are merely products they [auction houses] package and sell.”²⁵ The main goal of auction houses is not to educate, but rather to sell. This motivation is markedly different than that of museums and may affect a presentation or demonstration at such a public program. Yet the role of an auction house often parallels that of a museum. Auctions, much like museums, exhibit change and shifts in history and cultural attitudes. At an auction, there is the visible transfer of items from one place or person to another. In many ways, auctions and their records, whether it is advance catalogues, receipts, newspaper reporting, or filmed transactions, highlight a clear transfer or “social, economic and aesthetic boundaries.”²⁶ While museums and auction houses both perform similar functions in society through exhibiting change and presenting artifacts to the public, the root motivation of each differs and should be taken into account when encountering a public program.

The relationship between museums and auction houses is another element deserving focus with the popularity of material culture programs, which often teams these two diverse intuitions. Auction houses often market themselves as community-invested institutions. While auction houses range in size and scope,²⁷ most strive to establish

²³ Ibid., 13.

²⁴ Freudenheim, “Museum Collecting, Clear Title, and the Ethics of Power,” 52.

²⁵ Hamilton, *Auction Madness*, 24.

²⁶ Cynthia Wall, “The English Auction: Narratives of Dismantlings” *Eighteenth Century Studies*, Vol. 31, No.1. (Fall, 1997): 1-25. 21.

²⁷ International ones with numerous branches versus the tractor auction down the road in central Illinois.

a well-rounded community presence. Skinner Auctions frequently publishes the fact that they “support museums, historical societies, schools, libraries and non-profit organizations around New England with events that are both highly entertaining and excellent fundraisers.”²⁸

Additionally, museums and auction houses maintain business relationships concerning the very collections and artifacts of each. Often museums, or collectors on a large scale, consign redundant items to auction houses. Sometimes this practice is a matter of policy, and other times the product of financial need.²⁹ Further, if a museum is trying to achieve a balanced collection, curators and museum personnel are often found on the auction house floor scouting out potential items to include in collections. Public criticism of the relationship between museums, corporate advertisers, and auction houses keep institutions in check. Much like the thin line museums walk when it comes to offering appraisal advice or references, the influence of auction houses or sponsoring corporations of public programs or exhibits is a careful line to walk. In a 2005 *New York Times* column, a staff reporter critiqued influences of museum exhibits and popular public programs by noting:

Money rules. It always has, of course. But at cultural institutions today, it seems increasingly to corrupt ethics and undermine bedrock goals like preserving collections and upholding the public interest. Curators are no longer making decisions. Rich collectors, shortsighted directors and outside commercial interests are.³⁰

Such criticism points out the sway power of dollar signs when it comes to exhibits, public programs, and collections. Museums hosting material culture programs need to mind such criticism when partnering with auction houses, or appraisal firms to ensure a balanced and objective presentation of material culture education.

The resulting social consequences and issues of material culture programs are numerous. Importantly, public programs at museums, auction houses or other cultural institutions invite the public, or Carl Becker’s “everyman” historian to engage in history. Mirroring popular time-tested television programs, this increase in public programs displays creativity on behalf of programmers nationwide encouraging the continuing education of the public and history. This engagement of the public and their own material past results in a shared learning

²⁸ “Appraiser Open House” Event Information, Skinner Auctions & Appraisers. Ibid.

²⁹ L.G. Hewitt, L.G. *All About Auctions* (Radnor, PA: Chilton Book Company, 1975) 10.

³⁰ Michael Kimmelman, “What Price is Love?” *New York Times*, 17 July 2005.

process about objects and artifacts, and creates an academic and often entertaining atmosphere of luck, chance, and scholarship.