

**EXAMINING THE IMMATERIAL WITHIN THE MATERIAL:  
A STUDY OF VINTAGE ITEMS AND ANTIQUES**

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I spend my life surrounded by things: I buy them, use them, give them to people, and throw them away. But before coming across the anthropological study of things, I had rarely contemplated their active nature and their relation to me, despite them being an integral part of my everyday life. In their works, Appadurai (2003) and Kopytoff (1986) describe and investigate how objects, in the same way as people, are capable of having lives and biographies: both physically, socially and economically (Kopytoff 1986: 68). This concept intrigued me initially and I decided to focus my project on antique and vintage items in particular because, in my experience prior to field work, items from the past are perceived to have a richer background and story to them than a modern or mass produced object. With this preconception in mind, I sought to examine how people who bought and sold antiques and vintage items interacted with the objects: whether they did endow the objects with any particular significance and why they were attracted to these historical objects.

I conducted my fieldwork in an antiques centre in Buckinghamshire, England; it is located in a sleepy village in a fairly affluent area of British countryside. Situated in a Grade II listed old post office, the antiques centre itself lives up to its contents by already feeling endowed with a sense of history. Rickety stairs, pokey rooms, low ceilings and a large open fireplace generate an intimate shopping experience.

I spoke to a number of employees there, and at an antiques fair hosted by the centre, about their experiences with antique and vintage items. My interviewees were not experts or trained, which surprised me initially; they had all drifted into the field, either as a hobby or continuing the family tradition of antique dealership. An informant who sold vintage mirrors and perfumes said, 'An antique is over 100 years old, that's how it's defined... Everything else is vintage.'

Before beginning this project, I had imagined that the price, saleability and monetary value would play a large role in the antiques world. However, price and profit were rarely mentioned in any discussion regarding the antique items at my field site. An informant who ran the antique store told me, 'There is the money, but that's not why most of us do it.'

Appadurai states that an item that is an actor in economic exchange can be described as a commodity: an item that holds a monetary value (2003: 76). In this sense, the antique objects for sale at the centre were commodities, in that they could be exchanged for an agreed price. However, for my interviewees, antiques were more than objects of monetary value: they contained emotional and cultural value too. Kopytoff (1986) argues that there appears to be a clear opposition between commoditization and culture, however antiques seem to embody and operate within the liminal ground between commodity and culture. Kopytoff states that the process of commoditization standardises worth of objects, which is against culture, because the primary principle of cultural is discernment between what is of worth and what is not (1986: 69). For example, a mass produced and machine printed copy of a text would not have the same monetary or cultural value as a handwritten first edition. The mass produced text is seen as an everyday commodity and therefore less valuable than the first edition, which embodies cultural value.

This distinction is made problematic when dealing with antique and vintage items. Kopytoff (1986) describes the status of commodity as something which can be transitory and temporary for an object; an item may become a commodity for a time and then lose commodity status. This process within the biography of an object is particularly poignant for the antiques. Many of the items in the centre would once have been commodities, for example the centre had both rare first editions and worn machine-printed Penguin classics. Both of which at one time were an easily available commodity, now transformed into something more valuable, by the passage of time. Scattered throughout the centre there were personal items belonging to the staff there that were not for sale, like old photographs and clocks. However, given the vast array and diversity of objects dispersed in the rooms, your mind soon started to play tricks and got you thinking that the photo of the owner's dog may be a priceless antique image. Before being told otherwise, everything is a potential item of value and meaning.

In the antiques centre, the judgement of individuals distinguished which item was of value and which was not. 'You see their personality reflected in the choices, definitely,' said an informant who helped run the antique store.

The interior of the antiques centre was divided into zones; each zone displayed items belonging to a different seller. The contents of each zone varied widely: some had only books; some had jewellery and vintage coats; some had numerous brass pots and jugs; some had various gardening tools. At first, it appeared to me as randomly allocated spaces for different items, however once one of my interviewees had explained the zoning system to me, I instantly noticed the different styles across each area. He informed me that the collections of the sellers readily reflected their personalities and personal tastes, and once you knew the person, you could identify clearly objects they had chosen. The concept of personal taste, and what one judges to be desirable and valuable, is hugely influential when describing the interaction between buyers and the antiques.

Bourdieu describes taste as 'the conscious or unconscious implementation of explicit or implicit schemes of perception and appreciation' (1984:2). I had thought, before undertaking this project, that antiques could be identified as valuable or significant through following expertise guidelines and adherence to certain decided factors such as age or condition, much like other artistic forms can be declared significant or successful. However, what was clear through interviewing my informants is that personal taste was much more important than any overarching rule of what was desirable. One informant who helped run the antique store said, 'Buy what you like, then the customer likes it too. Sometimes you buy something to make a profit, and you end up never selling it'.

Bourdieu argues that taste is an implicit mechanism for distinguishing social difference (1984: 466) and the industry of antiques and vintage items too reflects the tastes and social differences of many people. For customers and sellers at the venue, the purchase of antiques and vintage items seemed to be a search for authenticity amongst the mass produced objects that form the majority of available consumer items. The purchase of a vintage item of clothing from an antiques stall, rather than a machine made item from a

chain store, appears as a conscious decision to make a social statement. Shopping in a particular way or at a designated place, like at the antiques venue, is presented as an act of resistance, in opposition to the presentation of commodities as 'typical representations of the capitalist mode of production' (Appadurai 2003: 78). Taste in material culture is used to express a wider political conviction in addition to defining personal style, 'The youngsters who are into it, a lot of them are into vintage clothes. It's a different style,' said an informant who sold antique furniture and home accessory items.

The antique and vintage objects appeared as actors in the search for authenticity; it was perceived by customers that these objects offered an alternative to the commonplace and cavalier consumerism of the wider UK economy. For example, one stall holder I spoke to was selling tiny vials of perfume from the 1950s, which are a primary example of what a consumer may choose to purchase instead of mass made perfume from an established brand; the motives behind this decision may include the attempted search for authenticity and personal connotations that accompany the historical context of this object for the consumer. Through their connection to the past and position as vehicles of emotional influence, the antiques and vintage items are perceived to hold more value and worth than a modern commodity. Kopytoff describes how the passing of time invests an object with value, for example a car steadily loses value over the years, until after approximately thirty years, it once again gains value as it ages when it enters the classification of antique (1986: 80). This example demonstrates the transitory nature of commodity status and how items enriched with time are also invested in value.

Antiques serve as prime examples of how material objects can possess immaterial qualities. Whilst conducting my research, I was struck by how often the objects were perceived as metaphorical symbols, in addition to material things; vintage ladies' gloves representing old Hollywood glamour, post cards featuring views that no longer exist and tattered boxing gloves that embody hours of physical training. Pearce states the ways in which the past endures through to the present day,

‘The past survives in three ways: as objects or material culture; as physical landscape (the difference between which and artefacts is conventional rather than essential); and as narratives (which may, of course, take the form of film or tape as well as of written text)’ (2003b: 27).

Antiques and vintage items are perfect examples of the past lasting into the present day in the form of objects and material culture. The items carry meaning for the sellers and the purchasers, which make them desirable and valuable. Hodder describes how items possess meaning both through their personal significance to individuals and their wider historical context and connotations (2003: 12). In the case of antiques, historical context might include who the previous owners may have been or perhaps where the object was made. By contrast, in the instance of individual meaning and resonance, the antique is attractive to the buyer because it is personally affective. The poignancy of personal meaning versus the importance of historical context was a theme I was interested to explore in my field work. I wondered if it was the object in itself that was important to the buyer, or if the buyer was more concerned with the history of ownership and activity connected to the object.

Two of my interviewees, when asked about this difference in attitude towards the historical significance of antique items, had markedly different responses:

Interviewee 1 (*An informant who ran the antique store*):

‘Mostly you don’t know who the owner is or was. In an ideal world, you’d have a history and owner to every object. But nine times out of ten, it just isn’t the case. Because people want to sit at dinner with the neighbours, point at the painting on the wall and say did you know ...

*[Someone had just donated some paintings with detailed history attached to them to the venue, to which my interviewee now refers]*

See he’s [the customer with the paintings] gone to all the trouble of tracing it back, all the history. Most things just don’t have that.’

Interviewee 2 (*An informant who sold jewellery items*):

‘I like the history of it. Thinking I wonder who had that, what were they like, were they rich or poor ... you can tell by what they got!’

The response from Interviewee 1 seems to suggest that knowing the detailed background and history to an antique object dramatically changes the owner's attitude to it. For example, the suggestion that the object once had a famous or noted owner means that the object is now valuable through its association to that owner, rather than containing value itself. When there is a traceable history, the materiality of the object and its power for imagining the past is reduced. Through my research, it emerged that the mystery behind rootless objects is part of what attracts people to antiques. The items are standalone from tangible connection; there is only the connection that the new owners imagine for themselves. As my second interviewee says, they enjoy imagining the life of the object before they had it. The absence of knowledge concerning the antique's origin is not necessarily problematic; it is in fact part of the appeal of such items. They allow the owner to imagine a romantic past, which the antique item is the gateway to.

In his work about the personality of London, Reed describes how his informants imagined the city through the details within it (2002). For example, a specific detail on an old building enabled the viewer to see the landscape as it had been in the past, using their imagination (Reed 2002: 130). The feature acted as the catalyst by which the larger imagined being of the city could be realised (Reed 2002: 132). A similar theory can be applied to the antique items, which are the last scattered material remains of the past. Through imaginative processes, these items act as stimuli for seeing and appreciating the past; in the same way that a detail of the city transports one back in time, as do the antiques. This theory supports the idea that the true appeal of antique objects can only be understood through the imagination. An informant who sold antique furniture and home accessory items said:

'Mum and Dad were always into it. It wasn't a business or anything, it was just something they did. And we helped. Dad would bring a piece of furniture into the house, say a chaise longue, and he'd strip it down and Mum would do it up. Then sell it.'

The older antiques may be the gateway to imagining a distant past with which one is unfamiliar, and imagining the environment in which the object was once found. Additionally, though, many of the items in the venue were listed as vintage; examples of such items include jewellery trinket boxes from 1978, tattered Elvis records and original

Sean Connery as James Bond *Thunderball* posters. As I conducted my field work, I noticed that both the customers and the sellers visiting the venue were mostly over fifty years old; this prompted me to consider why this particular generation were more attracted to vintage and antique items. When the average customer age is taken into account, the vintage items on sale at the venue would have been objects present around the time of their childhood or youth. This introduces an element of nostalgia to the enjoyment of and attraction to antique or vintage items. The objects embody a metaphoric connection between the individual and their personal memories of the past, despite the fact that the object in itself may not have any actual connection to either the individual or such a memory (Pearce 2003b: 23). This ability to evoke romantic contemplation of the past, and in particular one's own memories, is a major factor in why I believe people seek to possess antiques and vintage items. Take for example the above quote from one of my interviewees: for her, the antiques themselves may be desirable and enjoyable, however as she states, the antiques also remind her of her childhood and family life. This is a prime example of the personal memories that are connected to material items. The objects are transformed as symbols of the past in the eyes of the owner; this elevates the object from material status and into a metaphorical sign. The symbolic nature of material items gives them a power to affect their surroundings and the people who interact with the objects. In the case of the customers at the antiques venue, the vintage items remind them of their own memories, evoking feelings of nostalgia, and serve as a connecting device between the present and the past.

The highly individual nature of the emotional associations to material culture that people experience connects the past to the present for the owner of the item. Antiques and vintage objects, and their relationship with the past, are used to construct the present for the owner of object. Collection and ownership of these metaphorical pieces of the past influence how their possessors create their environment in the present (Pearce 2003a: 195). Through my experiences whilst conducting my field work, I saw that the people who were interested in antiques and vintage items often viewed the past in a romanticised way, idealising the past environment that the object may once have been present in, which it now represents. In addition, the past seemed to exist as the roots of the present for the antique possessors; as if a better or fuller appreciation of the past translates to making the present richer with meaning. The connection to this appreciation of the past is found within

the metaphorical symbolism of the antique and vintage objects. This nostalgic, rose-tinted view of the past which can accompany the antiques appears to be part of what makes the material culture of the past so desired.

One particular set of objects in the centre captured my imagination especially – there was a drawer of keys, which were each on sale for around £3. The keys have no identity; no one knows the locks they accompany or what they may have once opened. I found myself engaging with the historical imagining of who the keys used to belong to and what they might have unlocked; the sense of enticing mystery that accompanied the objects was undeniable. Through this understanding I realised that, although I had based my research in one location, the field site was in fact unbounded, both physically and temporally. The field site is created by the object itself: proximity to and interaction with it.

Through this project I have attained an insight into the world of antiques, a world which I knew nothing about prior to undertaking my fieldwork. Before interviewing my informants, I thought that I was not particularly interested in antique and vintage items because I generally prefer a more modern style to designs and objects in my personal taste. However, I realised that I interacted in the same ways with the antique and vintage objects: I too imagined their past, considered them as authentic representations and metaphorical symbols of the past and vehicles of intangible value. This project has revealed to me the nature of the ‘emotional potency which undoubtedly resides in many supposedly ‘dead’ objects’ (Pearce 2003b: 26) and how people construct their physical and emotional world from the objects they interact with.





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