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Antiques - Objects of Lateral Cycling?

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ABSTRACT

After a brief discussion of the various ways the use-life of an object can be prolonged, an additional method is illustrated, that of *adjacent cycling*. Antiques are used as examples. The role of antiques as status symbols is suggested to be the reason for their prolonged use-life. The archaeological implications of adjacent cycling also are discussed.

INTRODUCTION

In recent years there has been an increase in the attention given to the movement of material goods through contemporary American society. Many items no longer useful for the purpose for which they originally were manufactured are retained in this society, though an item which exceeds its usefulness is expected to be discarded. Schiffer (1971, 1975) discussed lateral cycling, recycling and conservatory processes, all of which operate to prolong the use-life of an object. Three aspects of the durable material element become variables in each situation of sustained use: user, form and the use itself. In lateral cycling the use and form of the object remain constant and the user varies. During recycling the form, use and user vary. Conservatory processes preserve the form of the object and generally the use remains constant. Use is temporarily suspended and the object can be viewed as being in storage.

None of these methods account for objects that sustain their original form but change user and use. This distinctive method of prolonging the use-life of objects first was recognized in a survey of antique stores undertaken by the writer while studying lateral cycling. Though furniture and clocks clearly are included in Schiffer's definition of lateral cycling, the whisky bottles, wagon wheels, commode sets and telephone line insulators on the shelves of an antique store are not adaptable to that definition. One becomes a collector's item for its monetary value, one is placed along a driveway, one is displayed on a shelf and the last becomes a paperweight.

Schiffer's (1971, p. 160) linear flow model for the use-life of a durable item can absorb this distinctive method of prolonged use. The idea of *adjacent cycling* is proposed. This type of cycling is adjacent to lateral cycling in that both go back to the beginning of the use process, but not as far back as the manufacturing process. The two differ in that use is a variable in adjacent cycling. It is conceivable that a durable item could be laterally cycled, recycled and adjacently cycled many times before being discarded.

STATUS IMPLICATIONS

Adjacent cycling is responsive to the characteristics of lateral cycling such as movement among caste, class and social units, and maintenance, storage and transport appear as the only intervening processes. In addition a mental attitude is involved that may not be unique to the types of cycling, but definitely differs from the attitude surrounding the recycled or laterally cycled item. A decision is made to use the item in a different way than that originally intended.

Many times the antique is bought as an agent of conspicuous consumption. Schiffer (1973, p. 310) observed:

In a complexly stratified, highly mobile society, quantity and diversity of household material objects vary directly with status....But at each successively higher level, new items are added until at the top, where the highest statuses are reached, material objects are found that have limited distributions.

This is a major function of antiques. Rare items, items of limited distribution or expensive items make obvious the delineation of wealth, thus class; of "taste," thus class. There are persons who want to preserve the past, but there are also those who are involved in the subtleties of class distinction, and thus create new uses for these objects.

ARCHAEOLOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

The fact that adjacently cycled objects usually are transported in the process of changing use, and the fact that the use does change while the form remains the same, present some interesting questions in the archaeological setting. Can it be ascertained that an artifact began and ended its use-life where it is found in archaeological context? What evidence remains of former use? A mano that has been adjacently cycled into a wall stone is easily recognized as such and one would not expect to read that the presence of a mano there inferred that grinding was done *in* the wall! However, a situation so easily recognizable is not the usual situation confronting the archaeologist. The question that must be considered is, "What are the other possible uses for that item in that form?" Eventually, the interpreter must consider why a society would need to reuse any element in its technological inventory. Many traditional explanations for the form and use of lithic objects could well be reconsidered on this basis.

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