

Undergraduate Learning and Research with Provenance Information

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ABSTRACT

Objects in multiple formats can comprise both the subjects and the approach making up “material culture”: a mode of investigating and understanding culture. Some colleges and universities steward millions of objects in academic galleries, libraries, archives, and museums (GLAM institutions). Convergence among such information professionals has led to recent offerings of an undergraduate honors seminar around campus material culture which is the focus of analysis in this paper. Students in that setting interrogated and applied the concept of provenance in reflecting on their object-based interactions. We analyze three categories of provenance lessons from the students to inform future teaching: (1) an object’s origins and pathways, (2) what provenance is and helps people do, and (3) new storytelling contributions.

ALISE RESEARCH TAXONOMY TOPICS

metadata; information use; students; pedagogy; archives.

AUTHOR KEYWORDS

collections access; provenance research; material culture; special collections; academic museums.

INTRODUCTION

Objects and artifacts generate original research opportunities. Specifically, a material culture approach to research is object-based, multisensory, and constructivist and particularly inclusive toward objects in multiple media formats. Textiles, costumes, artifacts, organic specimens, artworks, rare books and artist’s books, and photographs can all comprise the “material” that then proves highly conducive in building a student’s understanding of material

culture: “the study through artifacts, of the beliefs – values, ideas, attitudes, and assumptions – of a particular community or society at a given time” (Prown, 1982). A key premise in Prown’s definition is that objects are a *reflection* of the beliefs of individuals who made, purchased, or used those objects as well as of the society around them. Yet material culture, unlike information science or art history, is ultimately more of a methodological approach than a field of its own – and that is because, again, so many diverse media formats each lend themselves to purposeful examinations of culture. Add to this the 400-year-long history of colleges and universities as collecting institutions (Kozak, 2016) and we have the grounds for a rich convergence (Marty, 2008) among information professionals and (information) scholars to foster the study of material culture as a window into global cultures past, present, and future.

Gallery, library, archival, and museum (GLAM) professionals based in academic settings such as colleges and universities bring deep knowledge of their collections to the task of teaching material culture through an object-based approach. Objects serve as *evidence* of the presence – at some time in some place – of human activity and thought, and by virtue of their presence now, also serve to indicate that humans attached some kind of *value* to the objects (and there are many kinds of value, from intrinsic to utilitarian and more). The kinds of original research and study made possible by and with material culture can range equally as widely, from the very pragmatic to the very abstract.

The organizers of a new seminar based in an undergraduate Honors College adopted the above scholarly approach to material culture in creating their curriculum. At the same time, given their deep collection expertise, they shared an interest in guiding students’ learning of two key items: (1) how to interact with objects in public settings, and (2) how to interpret objects. If such items would comprise the pragmatic classroom expectations of students in the course, they still needed to rest on a solid scholarly foundation that would lend clear purposes to studying with objects. One foundation arrived in the form of object biography, in which one or two *objects* (rather than a theme or idea) are centered by a student who might then compose a story, interpretation, narrative, or even biography (and see the series of provocations by Hicks et al., 2021) about their chosen object – communicating its time, place, and use contexts. A second conceptual foundation emerged in support of the first but with greater flexibility to accommodate objects whose presence today simply seemed more confusing: the broader concept of provenance.

Provenance is defined by archivists as the “origin of an item *alongside* information regarding the item’s custody and ownership across time” (SAA Glossary, 2022). Though provenance has deeply structured archival work since it originated in 1841 France, our focus in the remainder of this paper will not be on the professionals’ practices and remodelings around it but rather on users’ interactions with it in its various manifestations. We specifically consider undergraduate students interacting with provenance in the context of studying material culture housed in academic collections. Though the key premises of material culture as introduced above remain our guideposts, the course *lecture* material foregrounded provenance ideas as generative inroads towards our premises most palpably in its recent 2018, 2019, and 2021 offerings, and those student and instructor experiences are the focus of our below analysis.

LEARNING (OUTCOMES) ABOUT PROVENANCE

Over the three specific course iterations detailed above, 39 honors students completed the seminar, an average of 13 per term. The class size is driven primarily by space constraints in place at the GLAM settings that alternate as the host classroom from week to week. In such contexts, students are indeed able to learn about, practice, and write about object interaction techniques all during class time. For example, when students are walked through a gallery by a curator of the collections on display, they each jot notes and make sketches about the artworks encountered; unstructured time is built into the end of the walk for students to return to items for a second look, ask questions with the curator and/or instructor directly, or otherwise capture and communicate their reactions upon seeing the art (often for the first time). Students submit a weekly synthesis that reflects on their GLAM encounter. Syntheses are allowed to take the form of a drawing, 500-word essay, or other creative expression.

An inductive analysis of those syntheses generated three categorical themes of lessons-learned by the students about provenance: (1) An object's origins and pathways, (2) What provenance is and helps people do, and (3) New storytelling contributions. Alongside their presentation below, we connect our categories to one or more outcomes arising from taking on the academic method of studying material culture, either as its student or teacher. The outcomes may be informative in turn to information professionals concerned with ongoing access to collections for research.

An object's origins and pathways.

How did this object wind up here? 2021 Student K acknowledged that over the course of her visiting multiple GLAMs,

“for some objects, their background may be unknown and can only be based on inferences, where others come with **an entire story**. During this class, both of these situations occurred; there were some objects that carried an entire novel with them and others that were merely based on what may have been occurring during a particular time period” (emphasis added).

What K's quote provides is some authentic dimension on the scope and perhaps limits of choosing to consistently employ the relatively straightforward object biography approach (as in Alberti, 2005) whenever one engages in object-based learning. Indeed, some objects (ethnographic artifacts, in the given case) are accompanied by extensive documentation about their maker, owner, donor, caretakers, and other key human relations across its timespan, not to mention the assortment of other objects or things whose path it intersected (and it is the latter that has traditionally been prioritized in formal descriptive standards). Yet other objects (say, a rare book) are patently lacking in even half as many basic facts which may leave researchers in the position of deciding what kind of value to center in their study of the object within their research goals. Does its craftsmanship matter? Do scratches or wear affect its import, and to whom? In K's view, “Sometimes not a lot of information is needed in order to make an object significant.” We may not be able to reconstruct an object's origin journey with only the information presently available. Acknowledging that reality is a lesson in constructivism, especially of history and narrative, as well as in futurism via optimism.

What provenance is and helps people do.

In addition to constructivism, provenance can clarify to students what role and prevalence interpretation has during research, and in particular that interpretation can be occurring at one level but not another (what levels does the formal description or exhibit label, take on?). A student below applied her understanding of provenance to her analysis of a handbag:

“Who owned it? When examining the provenance of this object, it can be inferred that this purse was used primarily on fancy occasions or when in public because of its expensive material. Because of the material that made it, it is likely that the owner lived somewhere near a swamp, pond, marsh, or a similar habitat where alligators live. Because of its overall high quality, it can be inferred that the owner likely was pretty wealthy and lived comfortably. Furthermore, it can be inferred that the owner was a woman. ... Overall, this purse revealed a lot about the people who contributed to its production, the one who owned it, and the values of the citizens at the time” (2019 Student C).

In the partial excerpt above from a student’s original, constructed object biography, we follow along with them the various “inferences” they make about social aspects of the life of the chosen object. Indeed, as Alberti (2005, 561) has written, “we study ... relationships between people and people, between objects and objects, and between objects and people. We encounter not only collectors, curators, and scientists but also visitors and audiences.” The object biography approach now quite clearly would seem to resemble an honorific profile of a person, a narrative peppered with necessary references to key or pivotal moments but generally progressing to a tidy end. For contested objects, such an approach may not serve the yawning gaps in our knowledge or lack of full transparency that only arises from probing further. It is important at this point to recognize that provenance is not delimited only to one category of cultural heritage, but it in fact has resonance with collections traditionally housed in museums (which may also record an object’s precise geolocated findspot: provenience), archives (where it separates one collection from another), libraries (which may seek to reconstruct a book’s provenance via bookplates or watermarks), and galleries (concerned as they are with issues of authenticity and condition values). To that end, a student reflected holistically on its consistent appearance in exhibit labels:

“This week I was introduced to the word provenance which is the origin of an item/object and the history behind it. **Learning this word** has given me a new perspective on all of my past museum experiences, and hopefully a new appreciation and viewpoint as we visit others” (2021 Student K, emphasis added).

New storytelling contributions.

Object encounters become sources of inspiration to students reckoning with issues mentioned only tangentially in the themed curation or professional presentation of which the object is a part. In fact, grasping more completely the extent of knowledge about one or more pivotal moments in an object’s biography freed one student to creatively explore another span of time for which information remains clearly absent. 2018 Student E wrote a poem in response to seeing calligraphy in a rare manuscript:

“Some words are written with an exquisite hand,
Sharing the best of what I am.
Some words are scribbled,
Sharing my mistakes.
Along the way I create more words for myself,
Or even add embellishments around my favorite words.
I can draw around them,
or try to block it out.
But when I create, I decide what words to show,
How my art will look.
Sometimes I want to show only the beautiful words.
Sometimes I want to show the not so beautiful ones;
To tell others that it is part of our humanity,
And that there is nothing to be ashamed of.
When we create,
Our words are exhibited outside our bodies.
Beautiful or not so beautiful.
They flow onto pages,
Clay,
Canvases,
Metal,
Wood,
Fabric,
Or anything we can get our hands on.”

Similarly, 2021 Student D composed a poem titled “what information do you put in,” an excerpt of which reads:

“what information do you put into
a museum exhibit?
do I tell of history
and leave out the not-so-recent presence
or do I recharge with a mystery
and even include the symbolic pleasance”

E’s poem reckons with a tension between peaks and valleys, positive and negative experiences, but always the drive to express and share. To give structure or materiality to those personal experiences – the “favorite” ones especially – a maker will use “anything we can get our hands on” in order to “exhibit ... the beautiful words.” D’s poem reckons with gaps and absences in the information gathered and assembled as part of a presentation to the public. Both students are generating creative responses to language employed by information professionals to describe collected objects. They are recognizing that power, rights, and ownership issues are to be found – however transparently or opaquely – in the object descriptions, and so realizing that where such descriptions end, new research might begin. A third student wrote a short story:

“Her hand lingered on the old brass doorknob for a moment before she sucked in a breath and forced herself to open the door. ... She saw before her the mess of boxes that her mother had always meant to sift through and donate, her lip quivering only for a moment before she blinked away her tears and stepped further into the space. ... Upon opening this box, she was met with her on a Sunday afternoon. White pearls laid gently against her mother’s olive skin, rouge kissed her lips, and a tea cup was in her hand as her eyes met her daughter’s with delight.” (2018 Student T)

The evocation in T’s story above is wholly object-driven. Some readers may perhaps desire to know where the line is here between reality and something else (imagination). When working in the realm of storytelling, the stories one can tell *using* objects need not be informed only by their known provenance information; if they were, more often than not, the result would be incomplete or simply unengaging. Rather, the storyteller is compelled to *responsibly*, and ethically, go beyond the inherited or accompanying documentation to conduct outside research (as we saw earlier by Student C) about the time and place setting of interest. The provenance quest can thus venture into unexpected territories that may or may not have a historical record, and the ethical response when communicating those findings should certainly make clear the bases for their tale.

CONCLUSION

Prown (1982, 7) offers that there are three stages to material culture study: description, deduction, and speculation. In the second category above, students interrogated the levels of interpretation happening in the “official” object descriptions they encounter as public visitors (deduction). When a few students did engage in creative speculation (the third stage), they were quite clear in saying they were doing so, which is a form and practice of transparency. Questions of provenance may yet be underpinning all three stages, affecting a material culture student’s willingness to offer a new claim or new story, gathering and citing ever more external evidence. Direct interactions with information professionals allow students to connect the descriptions they read, with people who wrote them (at one time), and so too with the assumptions or choices they made as part of the process of stewarding cultural heritage.

Foregrounding provenance on a weekly basis as students encountered heritage collections prompted them to see collections beyond the surface level. The objects’ background story and history evidently proved as or even more intriguing to students as objects’ visible characteristics – especially those students new to the formal study of art, or of rare books. Certainty in our knowledge still may not extend much further than one or two “chapters” in an object’s biography, and the feelings of unsettlement that result, for some, from that comprehension are not wholly resolved in our short time together. While each synthesis offers its own intangible reward to the student – for having deeply reflected about a cultural artifact past or present – altogether the body of contributions only peel back the curtain on the expanse of questions still to be answered or addressed by continued, focused public engagement with our heritage collections.

The provenance concept gives students an inroad for critically engaging with and thinking through objects maintained in public settings over long periods of time. Most importantly though, provenance and its research have not usually been the final destination of the

students' object-based research contributions. Their explorations during the course provide a basis for sustained creative viewpoints and scholarly outlooks. Provenance can deeply inform and shape the narratives we tell with and about objects – given its close proximity to issues of source trustworthiness, source diversity, source availability or openness, and source completeness – and its likely presence in many authoritative collection access points (catalogs, exhibit labels), even if under a different name. Continued incorporation of provenance when introducing students to new collection objects and their research potential will expand students' ability to critique and retell stories about the longevity of objects around them.

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