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## Authenticity and Affect: When Is a Watch Not a Watch?

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### ABSTRACT

AUTHENTICITY — THE VERIFIABLE CLAIM that an object is what it purports to be—is crucial for the value of an artifact as evidence, cultural object, research source, and object worthy of collecting, curating, and preserving. This essay explores another aspect of authenticity in artifacts, one rooted in subjective experience and less amenable to verification but often equally important for meaningful use of retrospective resources—the ability of an artifact, through its physical presence, to create an experiential and affective response in the researcher. The essay further explores the implications for collectors and special collections librarians of the fact that digital objects can be likened to physical artifacts because they also claim experiential and affective authenticity.

In the most elementary sense, to be authentic is to be what one purports to be: to be what one seems.

In the world of special collections, authenticity is essential. It underlies all the values of the physical artifact both as a cultural object and as a commodity acquired by collectors. The values that depend upon an artifact's authenticity, well articulated by the preservation, special collections, and antiquarian trade communities, include aesthetic value, importance in the history of the medium, age, scarcity, association, monetary value, features of interest, and exhibit value (Elkington, 1992). If an item such as a rare book, a vintage photograph, a manuscript map of Vinland, or any item that claims artifactual value is proven to be inauthentic—to be passing for something that it is not—then it loses much of its value as a research source, an exhibition item, or an object worthy of collecting. Given the importance

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of authenticity in its objective dimension for the intellectual, cultural, and monetary value of an object, these values are generally accessible to various technical and historical forensic examinations that support one or more claims to authenticity, from documentary evidence of provenance to analyses of chemical composition.

But in the realm of special collections, objects can be many things to many people. What a single artifact seems to be can be understood not only with traditional forensic tools for objective measurements but also by close examination of more subjective aspects of that item—its context, its implicit history as evinced by its explicit appearance, and its uncanny ability to carry, through its very materiality, intangible affects. That is because a physical object often has more meaning or significance than its creator intended it to. A book carries not only the text printed on the pages but also the explicit evidence of its use, such as marginalia and stains, and the cultural information implicit in its size, font, layout, and innumerable other physical traces that may or may not lend themselves to interpretation. This is equally true of more ephemeral artifacts, such as, for example, road maps printed in the 1920s. A single map can allow one to see not only parts of the transportation infrastructure of the time but also, through examining the advertising and design elements, the products that were marketed to map readers; the tastes of the era for certain shapes, widths of line, color palettes; and other features that may not be well represented by a surrogate of the map. That is in addition to any folds, tears, stains, or annotations that may indicate any given journey's planning and execution.

And it is that capacity of an artifact to carry evidence that is accidental, unintentional, implicit, or simply of secondary or tertiary importance from the point of view of the creator that is often most valued by users and is also often referred to as its "authenticity." This approximates what Walter Benjamin called an art object's "aura." To be in the presence of the original and authentic, one has access to "all that is transmissible from [the object's] beginning, ranging from its substantive duration to its testimony to the history which it has experienced" (Benjamin, 1968, p. 221). In the context of library and archival sources, that "aura" might be more accurately defined as experiential or affective authenticity. In the presence of the physical object, the researcher has an immanent experience of the artifact and, given the nature of human cognition, that experience has an affective dimension (Dolan, 2002).

It is this aspect of authenticity that appears to be most problematic in the emerging digital landscape—the quality of an artifact that produces a characteristic but perhaps unquantifiable affect in the user through its physical presence. Depending on the expertise and skill of the researcher, this affect can be an important and valuable part of research because that affect triggers a set of meaningful associations. These aspects of the artifact go to how the physical evidence in the object is or is not affected by its

specific context and relationship with other objects, its precise presentation, and other factors that alter or influence one's perceptions of the artifact. Many comment that surrogates are notable for their inability to convey those crucial artifactual aspects and can deliver to the user only that which is fungible, that is, portable in any format. Anything that is intrinsic to the physical presence is lost. Digital representations are nowadays much preferred for research purposes, in part because they tend to lose less information than other forms of surrogacy. Indeed, there are many features important to research and enjoyment that are added through digitization. But there is something irreducible about an encounter with the real thing, and that is what constitutes the experiential and affective authenticity of the artifact.

Before exploring how experiential authenticity may play out in the digital landscape, however, it may be helpful to unpack our intuitive and too often unexamined understandings of how objects actually work in the physical world. For insight into this, we turn to Sherlock Holmes.

### WHEN IS A WATCH NOT A WATCH?

In the character of Sherlock Holmes, Arthur Conan Doyle created an intelligence that foreshadowed the spectacular scientific capacities developed in the twentieth century to squeeze evidence from the smallest fragments of mute matter. Sherlock Holmes was able to establish the probabilities of past events and present culpabilities through such means as the complexion of mud, the texture of cigar ash, and canines that do not bark. For Holmes's purposes, objects lack intentionality: that is, physical objects are acted upon and do not themselves act. Through their lack of intentionality, they can yield reliable, unbiased evidence.

Holmes was very alive to the values of context and relationships when he interpreted physical evidence, and he always made a crucial epistemological distinction between observations and the deductions made on the basis of such observations. He relied on probabilistic reasoning to reach a deductive conclusion, but only on the basis of rigorous examination of physical evidence. He was, in other words, a good scientist. But he was seemingly dead to those aspects of objects that make them more than empty vessels for evidence.

Dr. Watson, on the other hand, was exemplary of those who, like curators and collectors, are very much alive to other aspects of the object. In a misjudged challenge to Holmes's claim to be able to postulate facts about the past based on seemingly scant physical evidence, Watson allows us to see precisely how an object—in this case, a pocket watch—has many lives and many meanings.

In *The Sign of Four*, Watson peevishly tests the boasts of his friend to be able to deduce whole narratives of action from the smallest traces of physical evidence. He hands Holmes a pocket watch about which he said nothing other than that it had recently come into his possession. "Would you

have the kindness to let me have an opinion upon the character or habits of the late owner?" he challenges him.

The "slight feeling of amusement" Watson felt in his heart as he handed over the watch to the scientist was soon transformed into an exercise in anguish. For, from the physical markings he observed on the watch, Holmes deduced that the previous owner was Watson's elder brother and he had inherited the watch, along with considerable means, from their father. Further, Holmes carries on with the relentlessness of the disinterested investigator, Watson's brother had subsequently squandered his money, lived through hard times, took to drink, and died as a consequence. To the shocked and mortified Watson, such harsh revelations about a member of his family about whom he felt deep shame was "unworthy" of his friend. The truth of Holmes's words were so cutting because the truth could only have come from a human source. Watson was convinced that some individual had related this shameful tale to Holmes in person, probably at Holmes's urging, because only people speak thus, and of such things.

But Holmes had spoken to no one. He had merely observed closely and from those observations made deductions based on probabilities. It was Holmes's belief that physical objects can speak without prejudice—indeed, they alone can speak without prejudice—and it is in the interest of society at large that we develop the skills to interpret their code. In this case, the "message" was scratched on the surfaces of the watch: marks left on the casing by pawnbrokers and scratches made carelessly by keys, coins, and hard objects that the owner negligently, probably drunkenly, let damage his expensive watch.

To Holmes, a man of science, all physical objects were potential tools in his hunt for the truth. It was the irreducible objectivity of physical evidence that so enchanted him. For Watson, though, the watch was a memento, a mnemonic device whose chief significance was to serve as a physical link with his unfortunate brother and his beloved father. The watch as a physical object was a repository of feeling.

The human conflation of evidence—something that bears traces of past events—and of mnemonic device—something that triggers a flow not of information but of remembrances and impressions from the past—is not uncommon in the daily life of objects. Yet it is remarkable nonetheless, for this easy conflation exemplifies the paradoxical ways in which memory in human beings has developed over the course of our natural history: from natural memory to artificial, one might say, from information embedded in neuronal pathways to information externalized in objects and symbols. As recent neuroscientific explorations reveal, "emotion exerts a powerful influence on reason and, in ways neither understood nor systematically researched, contribute to the fixation of belief" and, by extension, of learning and memory formation and recall (Dolan, 2002).

If to Holmes the watch is evidential in value, and to Watson emotion-

al, then to the watchmaker its value is functional. Watson's pocket watch was manufactured to convey information about time. It is the magic of some physical objects to signify many things simultaneously—evidence, memory, and tool—and thus to speak volumes to those who listen hard. This has been a truth well known to collectors and special collections librarians for generations.

So it is with objects and material culture in general—they convey information, they help us manipulate the world to our ends, and they hold our memories in storage. But this multiplicity of meaning and function seems to be uniquely significant in those objects explicitly created to carry recorded information—not the mute testaments left through personal objects like watches, but “message objects” that intentionally carry information in the form of words, numbers, images, and sounds, that we collect and share among ourselves, and that we preserve to share with those distant in time or place.

For those who use retrospective sources to retrieve information about the past, from detectives to historians, all physical objects can present themselves as potential tools in the discovery of a truth. For Holmes, such a researcher would be successful to the extent that he was scrupulous in observation, withheld judgment before the facts were all in, and was objective. Historians and other scholars who rely on retrospective resources cannot afford to suspend judgment until all the facts are in, because that time will never arrive. They are wise to rely on objective, observed, verifiable facts, but there are little of those to be found in the usual sources of history. Instead, they must rely on the records created by men and women from their own observations and perceptions at a given time. Whatever is to be found in those records that can help those in the present to gain access to the experiential and affective realities of the past will, if handled cautiously and appropriately, be of material aid. In this sense, researchers must have the sensibilities of Watson as well as of Holmes, while never losing sight of the watchmaker.

Benjamin argues that what is authentic in an object is that which is transmissible over time and thus can speak to present and future generations. Therefore, authenticity is that which is intrinsic to an object, as opposed to that which is fungible (Task Force on the Role of the Artifact, 2001). In the library context, a firsthand encounter with those ineffable, intrinsic qualities of the artifact is what researchers seek, alone or in addition to the information that an artifact can reveal. Benjamin goes on to make the seemingly bizarre claim that an object can, in fact, become more authentic over time, by which he means that its “aura” grows. Taken from the archival or evidentiary point of view, it is illogical to assert that an object grows in authenticity. Authenticity is like virginity: it can be lost, but it can never be regained.

But from the subjective sense, that of the experiential or affective connotation of authenticity that goes to the mnemonic powers of an object,

Benjamin's assertion, while perhaps overstated, can be true. An object's claim to authenticity, reified through its evocation of an experiential or affective response, can indeed wax as well as wane over time.

Finally, another feature of affective authenticity significant in the realm of the artifact is the ability of a cultural object to carry within it memories that, taken together, constitute an identity. In the case of Watson's pocket watch, this item linked him to his family and became vital to his familial identity. For Holmes to have read a shameful history into the watch was to have shamed Watson himself. This same ability to carry symbolically the identity of an individual, group, or nation is most powerfully illustrated by the fate of books, maps, manuscripts, and other special collections during wars of depredation and genocide. In contrast to art works that are culturally understood to be born of one time and place but belong to all ages and all peoples—from Leonardos to the Buddhas of Bamiyan—books and other special collections materials—the sorts of texts and images once found in the national library of Bosnia and Hercegovina in Sarajevo—are usually perceived to be more closely bound in identity with a specific language, culture, and time. Thus, confiscation, desecration, or destruction during war is understood as a sharper and more targeted assault on a specific people than the theft of paintings or destruction of ancient monuments.

### AUTHENTICITY AND DIGITAL REPRESENTATIONS OF PHYSICAL ARTIFACTS

The central question for special collections librarians at the turn of the century has been: What happens when cultural objects are created in non-material forms? What happens to their authenticity as information carriers, as mnemonic devices, and as evidence?

We know that context is a crucial element in establishing or evaluating the authenticity of special collections. It is a central tenet of collectors, be they individuals or institutions, that objects are best used and appreciated when in the company of like or associated items. This makes comparisons between similar objects easier, thus facilitating the apprehension of their distinguishing qualities. In addition, if an item is seen in the context of associated items, the user can better understand or imagine the historical context in which an item was created and for what purpose. The context in which one views or uses an artifact can have significant bearing on how the item is experienced or perceived. In archives, maintaining the original order or arrangement of items is considered an important step in securing the authenticity of records because of the high value placed on provenance—context—for evaluating the authenticity of archival records.

The context in which special collections are presented and the associations that exist between like items can be significantly enhanced in the digital environment, as numerous digitization projects have shown. Aggregating like items improves their research potential (the William Blake Ar-

hive, for example), and the reuniting of collections once integrated physically but now dispersed is a powerful tool for interpretation (such as the art and manuscripts from the Dunhuang cave in China). On the other hand, it is too often the case that, given the resources of time and money that high-quality digitization demands, large collections are often represented only by examples, or are even presented in entirely new contexts that actually make the representation of special collections online more like an exhibition or interpretation than an opportunity for in-depth research.

It is a truism that an item taken out of context can lose much of its authenticity. Dorothea Lange's famous photograph of the migrant mother, for example, became an iconic image of the Dust Bowl years, yet by becoming an icon, appearing again and again out of its original context of a suite of photographs documenting an entire family at one specific point in time ("Migrant farmer family. Seven hungry children. Mother aged thirty-two. Father a native Californian. Nipomo, California."), it has lost much of its integrity as a research object (Library of Congress, 2003). Special collections librarians are frequently called upon these days to make selections from large and diverse holdings for representation online. This is seldom an easy task, important as it is to make special collections more readily accessible to anyone interested in consulting them. One way to ensure against erosion of context and association or the creation of a false sense of authenticity is to make the curatorial criteria for choice transparent to anyone using the digital surrogates.

### AUTHENTICITY OF DIGITAL ARTIFACTS?

The issue of authenticity of digital objects and records has been addressed by several professional groups, from archivists and librarians to technologists and legal experts, though there remain a number of unresolved issues about how to verify through objective means whether or not a digital file is what it purports to be (Bearman and Trant, 1998; CLIR, 2000; InterPARES). But few have systematically engaged the issue of what the experiential or affective authenticity of digital objects is and how that can be identified and assessed, if not measured.

In the digital realm there are no objects-as-artifacts: that is, there are no objects that derive their importance from their sheer physicality in the sense that librarians, archivists, and collectors commonly use the term. Peter Graham has written that special collections cannot exist in the digital realm, because "there are no [physical] artifacts to provide added value to the substantive information" (Graham, 1998, p. 234). This is redundantly true if one defines special collections as aggregations of physical objects. Graham's assertion has challenging implications for libraries and collectors that bear further consideration.

While digital data are by their essence "immaterial" and digital files contain no "physical evidentiary information to assist in the study of the texts

themselves or to provide a history of their transmission,” it is not true that digital objects constituted from those data are entirely immaterial and can bear no evidence of their transmission. Indeed, they can be perceived and experienced by researchers only through material perceptions, and they do leave traces of their creation, use, and transmission.

This is not a mere philosophical or semantic quibble. Graham is fundamentally correct in his comparison between artifactual collections and digital collections. But to the extent that a digital object must be instantiated for someone to have access to it, then the digital object has materiality, though of a decidedly transitory sort. Indeed, not only does a digital object have an experiential dimension just as books and analog audio recordings do: that materiality has a specificity that changes with each instantiation due to varying processing speeds, screen size and resolution, and other hardware specifications. The specifics of any given instantiation or materialization are crucial, if impermanent, aspects of the object’s authenticity. These features are referred to rather loosely in the digital library and computer science communities as “the look and feel” of the digital object—those noninformational features considered intrinsic to its presence or “aura,” as Benjamin might have it.

According to Graham’s construction of special collections, in which digital objects by definition cannot have artifactual value, there would be no compelling reason for special collections librarians and other collectors expert in artifactual value to enter into the important and troubling attempt to define digital object authenticity. However, there are compelling reasons to argue for the serious and immediate engagement of experts in special collections, not limited to rare book and manuscript specialists, but all those expert in nonbook and nonprint formats, to enter the fray. Who is better positioned to assess the relative values of various aspects of the materialization of digital objects than those curators and collectors most attuned to the artifactual value of information objects, especially to the experiential and affective nature of an encounter with a primary source?

The beginning of a new millennium may be an auspicious time to recast the concept of “special collections.” The fundamental focus of special collections repositories has been to select, curate, and preserve primary source materials, regardless of their format. That the term “special collections” connotes rare printed or manuscript materials rather than primary sources as such, including but not limited to cartographic materials, films, radio broadcasts, and so forth, is a regrettable artifact of history, but one that should not hold back collectors and curators from joining together to engage issues of digital authenticity in all genres and formats.

There are already urgent pleas from faculty, scholars, and other users of digital collections for expert curators and collectors to define the artifactual value of a digital object as a *primary source* that warrants the same attention to selection, curation, and preservation as analog special collections

(Task Force on the Role of the Artifact, 2001). Such a definition would have incomparable significance for decisions about many things, such as preservation strategies (for example, migration versus emulation) based on the value of the “look and feel” of a digital object as opposed to its purely informational value (CLIR, 2000). Discussions on this topic sound like transpositions into the digital key of similar debates about the artifactual versus informational value of a book, photograph, or map.

As early as 1995, the Task Force on Archiving of Digital Information called for a definition of those features of an information object that “distinguish it as a whole and singular work,” such as content, fixity, reference, provenance, and context, in order to preserve the integrity of the digital object (Task Force on Archiving of Digital Information, 1996). That work has just begun, and it would be a great loss to research and collecting communities present and future if that work were left entirely to commercial producers of digital content and the technical communities that design, build, and operate computer systems and write software codes. It is time for libraries and archives to encourage actively the development of digitally literate curators, those with expertise in computer hardware and software as well as content, much as map librarians have expertise in cartography and its history, in printing and engraving and publishing, and in the history of various cartographic trades and enterprises.

There are not many in libraries to date who have staked out this new medium of communication and cultural expression as an area of curatorial expertise, and the research community is the poorer for it. But specialists there will be, just as there were specialists in rare books or in film long before people became rare book librarians or film curators. By and large those experts emerged from within the collecting community—academics and amateurs alike—and chances are that pattern will hold in the digital realm. We already see an enthusiastic community of gamers who are actively collecting and emulating computer games, expert in the hardware of the 1980s, their monitors and processing speeds and special acoustical peculiarities, each feature intrinsic to the “authentic” game experience. We also see digital artists declaring their intentions when creating a digital work so that it can be recreated or reexperienced in the future in what they declare to be an authentic manner.

It is true that a number of hallmarks of special collections as we currently understand the term will disappear in the digital realm. Such things as rarity, uniqueness, or content fixity will have little meaning in the collecting landscape. But other aspects of special collections that are familiar from the analog world will be encountered in the digital as well, such things as the quirkiness and heterogeneity of source materials, the sheer abundance of unpublished, unedited, and unmediated expression available on the Web, and the (often bewildering) proliferation of versions that must somehow be assessed for relative merit before acquisition. There will be

genres that disappear and others that replace them. What will become of road maps in the 2020s when every automobile is manufactured with a Global Positioning System?

Authenticity will continue to be a concept that has special significance in libraries and in special collections libraries in particular. Libraries are and will continue to be relied upon to provide information that is authentic and to represent to its users in a transparent way the provenance of that information so the patron can simply relax and trust the source. Often, in the mind of the researcher, the library makes a warrant (implicit) of the authenticity of an information source simply by acquiring it. The role that libraries will play in the digital realm will build on this most crucial identity of libraries as trusted sources of expertise on the quality and value of information, not on their convenience or market niche. Libraries risk losing that identity if they fail to develop curatorial expertise for the variety of digital genres that are emerging.

As noted above, there are many in the technical and curatorial communities who are addressing the issues of digital authenticity that arise from the question of whether or not a digital object is what it purports to be. There will be in due course experts that will make the world safe for reasonable assumptions about the evidentiary value of digital objects. There will be ways for a future Sherlock Holmes to investigate the details of files and bit streams and codes that reveal a good deal about the history of a particular file since its creation.

The subjective nature of an authentic item may well turn out to be the hardest challenge to grapple with in the digital realm. There are psychologists studying human-computer interactions and neuroscientists discovering the physics, chemistry, and biology of human memory, learning, and emotion. They will play important roles in shaping how our information technologies are developed and used. But who will collect, curate, and preserve the artifacts of our uses of information technologies? Who will be responsible for shaping and developing the historical record of human creativity and activity in digital formats? Who will keep alive the values of the special collections community in the digital realm if not the collectors and curators who presently make up that community?

Librarians and curators can begin this important work by forming partnerships with those who are presently creating, curating, and collecting digital objects. Such partnerships may begin on campuses where humanists, social scientists, and researchers in the physical and life sciences are building large-scale digital resources, ranging from thematic research collections, such as the Blake Archive at the Institute for Advanced Technology in the Humanities (Eaves et al., 2001), to collections of medical images of historical and clinical, as well as research, significance. Special collections librarians should also reach out to the various technical, scientific, and commercial communities who develop hardware and software or produce

and market digital content. There are numerous research universities and institutions that host advanced computing centers, often well funded by the federal government and hard at work on fundamental computer science issues that directly affect the creation, management, and persistence of digital objects over time. There are in addition many campus administrations that seek out and encourage mutually productive relationships with technology firms in the forefront of research and development. Those relationships should and must extend beyond science and mathematical departments to the humanities and the libraries that support humanistic inquiry. Given how rapidly digital information technologies are changing, there is little time to waste. The precious incunabula of the digital age that will be cherished and studied tomorrow will not endure long unless they are collected and curated today.

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