

The Object: A Look Into The Things We Own And How We See Them

Mason H.



The Object

My research served as an exploration of the objects in our lives, and how their use, design, and treatment define our humanity. I explored the art of Japanese packaging, Buddhist aesthetic philosophies, archaeology, the influences of time on objects, and the perspective of Guy Debord on consumerist culture and materialism. While seemingly disjointed, this wide range of topics came to inform my understanding of the significance of objects, and what they reveal about us as people.

As an artist, I see a great deal of humanity in objects. Art serves as record for human existence, but the most mundane and everyday objects we engage with embody the most inarticulable aspects of that experience, for the simple reason we do not regard them in the way we do art. Our treatment of such objects serves as a reflection of our most authentic actions. The objects we decide to create exist as physical records of us as individuals, but more important, us as a culture.

My two artworks demonstrate two different treatments of the same object: a manufactured fossil from the present. The first artwork displays fragments of a fossil as it might be shown in an archaeological exhibit in the year 12,072. By presenting a technology from the present as it might be interpreted by future people, we are asked to ponder the legacy we will leave behind, and what our possessions truly say about our broader cultural values.

The second artwork explores the treatment of objects using the traditions of Japanese packaging and the philosophy of *wabi-sabi*, the belief that objects are made more beautiful by their imperfection. Though this fossil no longer has utility, as it has been petrified, it can now be appreciated simply for its form and its allegorical significance. Set beside it are several layers of packaging inspired by traditional Japanese wrappings, meant to further appreciate the object, and the simple ritual of acknowledging the significance of an object.

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Introduction

For the longest time I wasn't sure of what to call myself. I developed a fascination with making objects at a young age, and found myself happiest while engrossed in some sort of personal project. I loved how clay stuck to my fingers, how paper creased and folded, how stitches appeared between seams, how wood bowed beneath the pressure of a knife, and how my eyes and my hands worked together to coordinate every new movement. The title of "crafter" seemed too casual, "designer" felt like an overstatement, and "sculptor" felt too specialized. In the end I settled on "maker", a term broad enough to encompass all of my passions without the pressure that I associated with the label of "artist". As put by fellow creative and maker, Tyler Hays, "making things blew my mind."¹ I became obsessed with experimenting: tinkering with new tools, trying new materials, and testing the limits of my abilities. I made objects with very specific functions, like my own paintbrushes, and others merely for their aesthetic value, a wooden desk accessory. I found the process of creating incredibly fulfilling, and the realization that my efforts and focus could yield such objects further fueled my passion.

I like the title of "maker" because it describes the process of creativity, and not the final product alone. For many years I simply assumed that I invested my focus and time in such projects simply to have created something, but the objects I made more often than not found themselves perched on a shelf and collected dust. Even the more utilitarian objects I made, like the bags and clothes, or the wooden spoons I carved, went unused - I had already focused my attention towards a new idea. These projects were not valuable to be simply for their visual appeal or function, but for the process of making them and the refinement of skill I gained each experience. Though I find satisfaction in the visual and functional properties of the things I make, my appreciation for them lies in the experiences I associate with them.

Below is a series of compiled introductions to artists, aesthetic philosophies, anecdotes, summaries of study, and notes which have come to inform my understandings of what I call "the object." In this paper I will further explore the relationships between the objects we own and their value. What is of greatest value to you? What do you choose to hang onto? What do you consider essential? And what does this say about you? But more broadly, what does this say about us as a culture?

The Japanese Design Paradigm

Wabi Sabi -

Wabi-sabi is a Japanese mindset and aesthetic centered around the acceptance and appreciation for the transient and imperfect. As a term, it is difficult to fully interpret as it lacks an English equivalent, and many of its core principles are counter to traditional western ideals of beauty and design. The words "wabi"



¹ The Clever Podcast. Tyler Hays. September 4, 2017.

<http://www.cleverpodcast.com/blog/ep-38-tyler-hays>

Cover Image: Koren, Leonard. *Wabi-Sabi for Artists, Designers, Poets & Philosophers*. Imperfect Publishing. Point Reyes, California. 1994.

and “sabi” in their most antiquated definitions describe melancholy, decay, and the ephemeral, but also the beauty that embeds itself in these classically dark concepts. Wabi-sabi accepts mortality, and the concepts of death and nothingness, embracing and accepting them to heighten one’s relationship with uncontrollable forces. “Rustic” is often used as the closest approximation of the term, but does little to describe the full scope of the wabi-sabi canon. As put by writer Leonard Koren, of *Wabi-Sabi for Artists, Designers, Poets & Philosophers*, wabi-sabi most broadly describes “the art of living.”²

The term first originated during the 15th-century as a direct response to the misuse of the traditional Japanese tea ceremony. In its original setting, “the tea ceremony [was] an interdisciplinary art form integrating architecture, gardening, painting and performance into the act of drinking tea,” and emphasized “an appreciation of the moment and its subtle impact on the world.”³ The ceremony at the time had been appropriated by Japan’s elite and military class as an opportunity to flaunt their wealth through the display of lavishly ornate china utensils. The tea ceremony had strayed from its roots, becoming an extravagant spectacle enjoyed by the wealthy alone. It was then that the zen priest, Murata Juko, wrote his composition, *The Letter of the Heart*, which aimed to return the art of tea to its origins through the implementation of four elements: Kin, ceremonial reverence; Kei, respect for tea itself; Sei, purity of both the body and spirit; and Ji, liberation from desire and base impulse.⁴ Juko’s newly designed tea ceremony was far humbler, and utilized more organic pottery forms and muted colors, encouraging the practice of restraint, mindfulness, and acceptance of nature.⁵ In distancing the ceremony from the use of lavish wares, which Juko considered distracting and superfluous, and utilizing imperfect and intentionally uncomplicated pottery, wabi-sabi was born.

While wabi-sabi is closely associated with pottery and the tea ceremony today, the term has come to represent a far broader set of principles. Wabi-sabi is the examination of imperfection in objects to recognize their overlooked beauty. For example, a broken vase which had been carefully mended would be considered more beautiful than the vase before it had been shattered.⁶ A follower of wabi-sabi would appreciate the pattern of filled cracks in the newly repaired vase, rather than dismissing the object and quickly replacing it.

In Japanese culture there is a great deal of focus on perfection, but wabi-sabi recognizes that the perfection - and by extension, beauty of an object - is judged in relative terms.⁷ For the perfection of an object to be appreciated, it must simultaneously embody an equal degree of imperfection and perfection. Wabi-sabi objects, because of their transient and impermanent nature do not “clutter” for two reasons: they are constantly appreciated, and thus necessary; and each maintain a specific function, they do not exist simply to exist - their utility is essential. To Koren, “wabi-sabi resolved my artistic dilemma about how to create beautiful things without

² Koren, Leonard. *Wabi-Sabi for Artists, Designers, Poets & Philosophers*. Imperfect Publishing. Point Reyes, California. 1994.

³ Woodgate, R.G. A Brief History of Wabi-Sabi. Web. May 4. 2016
<https://medium.com/subliminal-stimulation/a-brief-history-of-wabi-sabi-dbebc3e3e1c>

⁴ Woodgate, R.G. A Brief History of Wabi-Sabi. Web. May 4. 2016
<https://medium.com/subliminal-stimulation/a-brief-history-of-wabi-sabi-dbebc3e3e1c>

⁵ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V1gxziZwmkc>

⁶ Woodgate, R.G. A Brief History of Wabi-Sabi. Web. May 4. 2016
<https://medium.com/subliminal-stimulation/a-brief-history-of-wabi-sabi-dbebc3e3e1c>

⁷ Koren, Leonard. *Wabi-Sabi for Artists, Designers, Poets & Philosophers*. Imperfect Publishing. Point Reyes, California. 1994. Page 11.

getting caught up dispiriting materialism that usually surrounds such creative acts.”⁸ Though wabi-sabi was created to challenge the materialistic practices in Japan nearly 600 years ago, its utilitarian mindset and teachings of appreciation are equally if not more relevant to today’s American consumerist tendencies.

Leonard Koren summarizes his writings on wabi-sabi with a quick anecdote: “Things are either devolving toward, or evolving from, nothingness. As dusk approaches the hinterlands, a traveler ponders shelter for the night. He notices tall rushes growing everywhere, so he bundles an armful together as they stand in the field, and knots them at the top. Presto, a living grass hut. The next morning, before embarking on another day’s journey, he unknots the rushes and presto, the hut de-constructs, disappears, and becomes a virtually indistinguishable part of the larger field of rushes once again. The original wilderness seems to be restored, but minute traces of the shelter remain. A slight twist or bend in the reed here and there. There is also the memory of the hut in the mind of the traveler - and in the mind of the reader reading this description. Wabi-sabi in its purest, most idealized form, is precisely about these delicate traces, this faint evidence, at the borders of nothingness.”⁹ Wabi-sabi is an aesthetic mindset, but engages at its core the metaphysical connection between individuals and their environments. Wabi-sabi urges us to embrace the impermanence of our lives as that we do not develop attachment to objects, but an appreciation for them. A life spent pondering and seeking inspiration in all of life’s pursuits and experiences is a life spent presently, less fixated on simply the imperfection and instability of objects as they appear.

Tsutsumu, The Art of Japanese Packaging -

As explored above in the explanation of wabi-sabi, Japanese philosophy advocates for the utmost respect of craftsmanship and intention, and having visited Japan personally, I can confidently say this perspective is best communicated through the Japanese tradition of packaging, or *tsutsumu*. In Old Kyoto there is an unsuspecting and unlabeled shop by the name of “Naito Rikimatso Shoten,” which sells handmade bristle brushes and brooms made in-house by the Naito family. As I entered the small wooden interior of the shop it became clear to me that this business had changed very little since its conception in 1818. I perused the shop intently, overwhelmed by the beauty of the simple tools on display. On a series of tables sat rows of individually carved boxes, each containing a different scrubbing implement. The room was stocked with natural fiber scourers securely bound in delicate brass and copper wire, alongside equally impressive calligraphy brushes half the size of a pencil. Entranced, I selected a few small brushes, and handed them carefully to Mrs. Shoten, an eighty old woman who has maintained the family business. She set to work individually packaging the



⁸ Koren, Leonard. *Wabi-Sabi for Artists, Designers, Poets & Philosophers*. Imperfect Publishing. Point Reyes, California. 1994. Page 9.

⁹ Koren, Leonard. *Wabi-Sabi for Artists, Designers, Poets & Philosophers*. Imperfect Publishing. Point Reyes, California. 1994. Page 42.

delicate brushes with the patience and care one might direct towards the finishing detail of an artwork. Her worn hands creased thin sheets of brown paper, wrapping each brush twice before sliding it into a thin white paper envelope hand stamped with a small rabbit, tying each with grey twine. She repeated this process for each brush before handing the parcels to me. I did not think it possible, but my appreciation for these simple objects intensified, and it was a full two months after I had returned home to San Francisco that I could bring myself to unwrap the small packages.

The tradition of packaging in Japan was first developed in rural communities by merchants, laborers, and farmers for purely practical purposes. The first packages were used simply for protection during transportation, and were thus fairly rudimentary, often made from readily available natural supplies, commonly bamboo and rice straw. Practitioners of Zen Buddhism described packaging as representative of “the wisdom that comes from everyday life,” and was quickly embraced as a meditative practice.¹⁰ Through the meticulous wrapping of an object could the packager demonstrate the respect and pride taken in their work, extending the object’s significance past its intended purpose.

As the appreciation for packaging became more widespread, packagers began to consider themselves craftspeople and regarded their work as its own artform. Hideyuki Oka, an expert, collector, and documenter of Japanese packaging, explains “the act of packaging came to have important meaning in itself quite apart from the importance of the contents of the package. The package came to have a symbolic value quite distinct from its practical function.”¹¹ Packaging became a ritual, a ceremony of sorts, to reaffirm one’s appreciation for even life’s simplest experiences. The perspectives of wabi-sabi and packaging became closely intertwined, further establishing the principle that “everything could and should be made beautiful and a value system in which all objects, large or small, expensive or cheap, were of real value.”¹²

While the tradition of packaging is still widely practiced in Japan today, it has strayed from its roots due to the rise of mass production and because smaller manufacturers have been unable to devote time to more careful packaging techniques. The traditional use of packaging can still be found in the oldest shops, Naito Rikimoto Shoten being one of them. Packaging has once again become merely a means of protection during transportation, only now it is a great source of waste, doing little to elevate the packaged object. Quantity over quality has become the norm in developed countries like the United States and Japan, and it seems as though our appreciation for objects, regardless of their monetary value, has seemed to have slipped away from us. To promote more sustainable uses of materials, perhaps a return to more humble techniques, not unlike the tradition of packaging, which emphasize appreciation rather than production for the sake of production. Are we using our natural resources in effective ways, creating products which are both rich in utility and aesthetic value?

Sashiko Mending -

Sashiko, and boro mending, are hand stitching techniques not unlike embroidery that are used to repair and reinforce Japanese workwear. The term translates directly to “little stabs” in English.¹³ Before the advent of mechanized industrial looms, cloth in Japan was a precious

¹⁰ Oka, Hideyuki. *How to Wrap Five Eggs*. Weatherhill. Boulder, Colorado. 2008. Page 8.

¹¹ Oka, Hideyuki. *How to Wrap Five Eggs*. Weatherhill. Boulder, Colorado. 2008. Page 10.

¹² Oka, Hideyuki. *How to Wrap Five Eggs*. Weatherhill. Boulder, Colorado. 2008. Page 10.

¹³ The Textile Arts Center. *Boro-Sashiko the art of Mending*. October 22, 2012.

<http://textileartscenter.com/blog/boro-sashiko-the-art-of-mending/>

resource, and even the smallest scraps that today might be discarded were used. Farmers and fishermen whose uniforms had a tendency to wear out quickly first utilized the technique, sewing in new patches of cloth to repair their smocks, shirts, pants, and aprons. As work garments were worn out, with each new mending they becoming more durable and longer lasting. This was done out of necessity as cloth was an expensive, but it doubled as a display of respect, not only to the material but to the craftspeople who made it - often other family members.¹⁴ Closely tied



to wabi-sabi, sashiko “is a technique of transformation that honors the impulse to re-use waste and use materials efficiently.”¹⁵ The first to employ sashiko were of humble means, using what little they had to the maximum of its utility in an artful and conscious manner. As time wore on, the technique became more widespread and adopted by more experienced craftspeople, and more uniform stitching patterns became commonplace. Not unlike packaging, mending became an artform used to appreciate and enhance utilitarian objects by the people who used them most.

Sashiko mending and packaging teach us that there is value in the care of objects and tools as they are conducive to a more contemplative and artfully lived existence. Given the host of environmental and economic issues which we face today, the principles behind the practices of traditional Japanese packaging and mending may aid us in becoming more responsible and sustainable consumers. Have we lost sight of what it means to appreciate an object? What drives our need to consume and accumulate more products? American philosopher and essayist, Henry David Thoreau asks “What is the pill which will keep us well, serene, contented?”¹⁶

The Object as Artifact

Utility and Function -

From a designer’s standpoint, “utility” and “function” are terms essential in describing an object. They define the intention of the maker, the success or failure of the object’s unique design, and the way in which it is ultimately used or unused. The textbook, *An Introduction to Cultural Anthropology*, describes the nuances of utility and function quite concisely: “Utility is the matter of entering into action, function of entering into awareness.”¹⁷ While subtle, the distinction of these terms is helpful in better understanding the nature of the objects we engage with on a daily basis, as well as art, for that matter. For example, a slab of hardwood is given

¹⁴ *Kintsugi: The Art of Embracing Damage*
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IT55_u8URU0

¹⁵ Siddle Kat. *Sashiko*. SeamWork.
<https://www.seamwork.com/issues/2016/04/sashiko>

¹⁶ Thoreau, Henry David. *Walden*. August 9, 1854. Page 114.

¹⁷ A. K. M. Aminul Islam. *An Introduction to Cultural Anthropology*. Ardent Media. 1973. Page 113.

utility once it is cut, sanded, planed, and made into a desk, but it is only when we come to contemplate its design, significance, and *impact* that it assumes a function. Through this lens, function describes the feelings and thoughts that are inspired or provoked by an object.

But why are these definitions useful? As a maker, understanding these terms has enhanced my appreciation for utilitarian objects, but more specifically, the *intention* of design. *An Introduction to Cultural Anthropology* goes on to explain that “function is essential to art, utility not, [and thus] devotees of the fine arts have insisted on cutting away the utilitarian aspect of art.”¹⁸ While I agree that utility is not essential to art, I disagree with the notion that the utility of an art object should be dismissed entirely. Art engages with one’s emotional and intellectual experience, but aren’t those experiences also triggered by the mundane, or unintentionally artful objects? The swift action of a gardening shear closing is remarkably direct and consistent. The hinge on a door, fluid and silent. Art doesn’t need utility, but utility informs our relationship and experience of an object, and thus should not be discounted as an aspect of art. All utilitarian objects are in some way artful as they adopt both utility *and* function. The function of an object however, is measured by the degree to which it is contemplated. Marcel Duchamp’s “Fountain” is an excellent example of this principle.¹⁹ For this artwork, Duchamp set a found porcelain urinal on its side, and displayed it as an artwork in a series he referred to as the “readymade ... an ordinary manufactured object designated by the artist as a work of art.”²⁰ These artworks challenge the viewer to see utilitarian objects, even the most disagreeable or mundane in a new way, *contemplating* their form and beauty having been removed from their original context. In wabi-sabi, as all objects are appreciated for their utility they assume a level of function and artfulness, regardless of their aesthetic value. Good designs are ones which allow for the maximum and efficient utility, causing the user to regard the object with the contemplation that one might a piece of art, respecting and appreciating it.

Archaeology and Anthropology -

Archaeology is the study and use of recovered artifacts to better understand the values and practices of past cultures and civilizations. Often, these ancient relics are recovered from civilizations without written histories or language.²¹ It is solely through the examination of existing possessions, artworks, and objects that the past is communicated - in some small part - to the present. In this way, objects are an unintentionally means of communication between peoples across time. Entire philosophies



¹⁸ A. K. M. Aminul Islam. *An Introduction to Cultural Anthropology*. Ardent Media. 1973. Page 114.

¹⁹ Marcel Duchamp. “Fountain.” 1917, replica 1964. <http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/duchamp-fountain-t07573>

²⁰ Tate Modern. Marcel Duchamp. “Fountain.” <http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/duchamp-fountain-t07573>

²¹ Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission

<http://www.phmc.state.pa.us/portal/communities/archaeology/resources/value-archaeology.html>

can be shared without words, and merely through the close analysis of the tools and objects of a given people. As put by the Pennsylvania Historical Museum Commission “artifacts are proof of those before us and serve as a physical connection to our past.”²² With even a partial understanding of past peoples can a more complete trajectory of human progress be mapped and recorded, answering larger questions about our nature as human beings. When an artifact is studied, it is examined for its form, but more importantly for its function. The person who designed it, made it, and used it are all considered. What were their intentions? How did it come to be?



Take for example the Cyrus Cylinder, a fractured clay cylinder inscribed in Babylonian cuneiform. The artifact measures a mere 23cm long, and was made in 539 BC following Cyrus’s conquest of Babylon.²³ While unsuspecting, this object is sometimes referred to as the first proclamation of human rights. The short text declares Cyrus the new ruler of Babylon, while also articulating Cyrus’s belief that the Babylonian people should be free to worship their own deities - the cause of many past tensions. The decision of past

stone carvers to set in stone forever this proclamation demonstrates its importance to the peoples of the time, while simultaneously presenting an excellent example of the craftsmanship and design sensibilities of the past.

While I am not an archaeologist myself, I see a great deal of humanity in objects, especially well used ones. Blue jeans are a particularly good example of this, as most Americans own at least one pair of them. Jeans are made of denim, a relatively sturdy and durable fabric that takes and shows age well. A pair of jeans that have been muddied, torn at the knees, faded to a lighter shade in areas, and shredding at the legs indicate that the wearer uses them for work, and uses them well. A pair of jeans that is bought with pre-torn holes and little wear indicates that the wearer values the garment for its aesthetic appeal, and less so for its original utility. Today, there exists a small community of obsessive jean-wearers known as “Denim Heads” who wear their jeans for extended periods of time in specific manners, documenting the condition of their jeans to demonstrate the wear marks which they have been able to develop.²⁴ Many do this as a form of self-expression. As no two pairs of heavily worn denim are identical, the aging of denim is an opportunity to personalize one’s wardrobe. While I do not pass judgement on any of these denim owners, their lifestyles are communicated through the condition of the jeans that they wear. To say that the objects we own define us is an oversimplification of our relationships to objects. The objects we own serve to *document* our behaviors, attitudes and habits - the unconscious aspects of everyday life. What we choose to buy, collect, and hold onto reveal aspects of ourselves

²² Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission
<http://www.phmc.state.pa.us/portal/communities/archaeology/resources/value-archaeology.html>

²³ IHF America. *What is the Cyrus Cylinder?* October 8, 2012.

<http://cyruscylinder2013.com/2012/10/what-is-the-cyrus-cylinder/>

²⁴ Heddels. *Denim Heads Dictionary Term*. <https://www.heddels.com/dictionary/denim-head-dictionary-term/>

which even we cannot fully articulate. This begs the question: What will future peoples determine about us based on the artifacts we leave behind? What in our lives do we take for granted, and how are they most revealing?

The Long Now Foundation -

The Long Now Foundation (TLN) was established in 1996 by close-knit a team of scientists, writers, philosophers, and engineers based in San Francisco with one simple but lofty goal: to alter public thinking about *time*. The founders of The Long Now were discouraged by the mounting social and environmental issues that had emerged in the early 1990s, and sought to find a potential solution. After years of dialogues, seminars, and studies, it was decided that the escalation of many societal dilemmas could be attributed to a deep set cultural misunderstanding of time.²⁵ The Long Now argues that as we rarely consider the impact of our actions beyond our *lifetime*, our scope of our actions are hindered by our limited capacity to think beyond ourselves. As put in their mission statement, “The Long Now Foundation hopes to provide a counterpoint to today's accelerating culture and help make long-term thinking more common. We hope to foster responsibility in the framework of the next 10,000 years.”²⁶ The foundation encourages long-term thinking to broaden the scope of human potential, encouraging us to consider more responsible pursuits and sustainable action which will positively impact future generations. “Civilization is revving itself into a pathologically short attention span. The trend might be coming from the acceleration of technology, the short-horizon perspective of market-driven economics, the next-election perspective of democracies, or the distractions of personal multi-tasking,” explains Stewart Brand, a founder of TLN. In short, short-term thinking hinders our progress as a society, blinding us from recognizing the impact of our actions beyond our lifetime. While short-term thinking is not a new phenomenon or unique to present generations, the current rate and scale of production poses a greater environmental impact never before encountered. If it is expected that the social and environmental issues of today be solved in the limited window of only fifty or sixty years, the task becomes daunting, if not impossible. By considering the same issues with the long-term in mind, progress can be thought of incrementally as opposed to all at once. Will we be known by future peoples as the generation which thought ahead? *How will the quality and quantity of the objects we leave behind inform their assessment of us?*

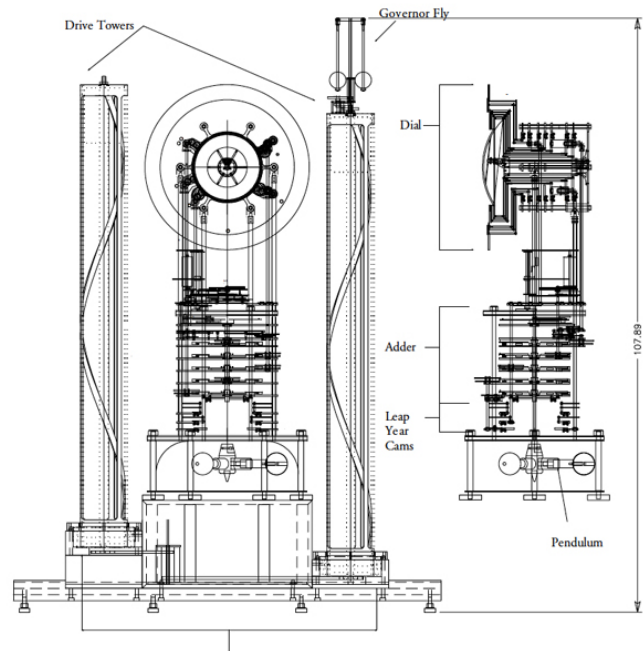
The foundation has since expanded to become a global network of sorts, connecting scholars, intellectuals, and thinkers of all different backgrounds and fields of study. The Long Now frequently hosts and organizes seminars and lectures at their headquarters at Fort Mason, but most of the foundation's focus is concentrated on two ongoing projects: the “Rosetta Project” and the “10,000 Year Clock”.²⁷

²⁵ The Long Now Foundation. 1996. <http://longnow.org/seminars/>

²⁶ The Long Now Foundation. 1996. <http://longnow.org/>

²⁷ The Long Now Foundation. 1996. <http://longnow.org/>

The Rosetta Project “is a global collaboration of language specialists and native speakers working to build a publicly accessible digital library of human languages.”²⁸ The Long Now has worked to compile over 1,500 human languages, carefully documenting each to create a document comprised of over 13,000 pages filled with cyphers, alphabets, and languages. This is done as a means of preserving human language for future generations for reference, should a culture’s language go extinct. The full document is accessible online, however to ensure that this wealth of knowledge is preserved, the 13,000 page document has been etched with a microscope onto multiple small nickel disks, serving as a key, or “‘decoder ring’ for any information we might leave behind in written form - in any language.” The Long Now engineered these disks as artifacts with the understanding that the knowledge they contain may be necessary for future peoples, serving as a link between the present and future.



The foundation’s second ongoing project is far more technically involved and of larger scale. The Long Now has designed and begun construction a massive 10,000 year clock to be built within a mountain in East Texas. To introduce the project, computer scientist and member of The Long Now, Daniel Hillis explains, “people used to talk about what would happen by the year 02000. For the next thirty years they kept talking about what would happen by the year 02000, and now no one mentions a future date at all. The future has been shrinking by one year per year for my entire life. I think it is time for us to start a long-term project that gets people thinking past ... an ever-shortening future. I would like to propose a large (think Stonehenge) mechanical clock ... It ticks once a year, bongs once a century, and the cuckoo comes out every millennium.”²⁹ The clock itself is a true feat of engineering genius, with an energy system relying solely on natural temperature shifts to power the clock’s mechanism, a vast arsenal of specially made mechanical components, operating with the exactitude one would expect from an exceptionally made wristwatch. The clock, as of now, has no set completion date, but is estimated to stand at 200 feet. The clock is powerful not only for its impressive mechanical ability or its colossal scale; it is a demonstration of the beauty and influence of long-term thinking. In my eyes, while the clock’s utility is magnificent, its impact as a symbolic object is far greater. As an art object, function object, and *lasting* object, the 10,000 Year Clock asks us to contemplate the true impact of our life’s work, the nature of time as a force, and the beauty of long-term human achievement and investment.

²⁸ The Rosetta Project. <http://rosettaproject.org/>

²⁹ The Long Now Foundation. 1996. <http://longnow.org/>

The Study of Worth *Clutter in Context -*

To say that we live in a world populated by “things” is not a groundbreaking observation. It was estimated that the average American household owns a total of 300,000 objects, including everything from “paper clips to ironing boards,” and that number has only grown in more recent years.³⁰ The cause of this is equally unsurprising; the top 200 American advertisers spent a collective \$137.8 billion in 2014.³¹ American consumerist culture has been critiqued time and time again by philosophers, writers, and artists alike. Though it is not always at the forefront of our thoughts, it is widely recognized that a life lived with fewer, more meaningful possessions is conducive to a more fulfilled existence. As a culture we have accumulated an excess of nonessential objects with redundant utilities and functions of little to no consequence. While I do agree that ‘less is more’, I recognize that the degree to which this is true is not universal, varying between people. While the abandonment of all possessions is not essential, it must be recognized that the *confrontation* of our possessions is necessary to evaluate their true worth.

The Society of the Spectacle -

Guy Debord’s *The Society of the Spectacle* is a critique and exploration of consumerist culture and the negative social consequences it emboldens. The first chapter of the work is devoted to introducing Debord’s theory of the “Spectacle,” which at its core expresses “a social relation between people that is mediated by images,” in short, the way in which commodified objects influence social order.³² Debord argues that consumers have been conditioned by marketing efforts and industry to believe that one’s social status and achievement is gauged in terms of what one owns. Debord writes “... human fulfillment [is] no longer equated with what one [is], but with what one possesses. ... all ‘having’ must now derive its immediate prestige and its ultimate purpose from appearances.”³³ By conflating the monetary value of products with personal value and worth, companies are better able to sell their products. In doing so, industries must maintain the imagined worth that they have associated with their product, thus enabling an endless cycle of production, marketing, and consumption. As industries remarket and release new products, consumers buy them in an attempt to associate themselves with the lifestyle or status that surrounds that particular product. This dynamic may appear to concern only the buying and selling of products, but Debord argues that the Spectacle’s influence “is actually so complex and full of metaphysical subtleties,” that it permeates all facets of modern life.³⁴ Debord goes so far as to say that it has augmented our perception of reality, and of “survival.”³⁵ The degree to which a population believes that the worth is defined merely by ownership is the degree to which a society is distracted, blinded from the true richness of life. It should be clarified that Debord critiques capitalism and consumerism not because he is opposed to them as economic systems, but because they *engineer* our behavior, dictating the course of our lives. In a summary of Debord’s work, writers Tiernan Morgan & Lauren Purje explain that the Spectacle

³⁰ MacVean, Mary. *For many people, gathering possessions is just the stuff of life*. Los Angeles Times. March 21, 2014. Web. <http://articles.latimes.com/2014/mar/21/health/la-he-keeping-stuff-20140322>

³¹ O’Reilly, Lara. *These are the 10 companies that spend the most on advertising*. Business Insider. Jul. 6, 2015. Web. <http://www.businessinsider.com/10-biggest-advertising-spenders-in-the-us-2015-7>

³² Debord, Guy. *The Society of the Spectacle*. Soul Bay Press. Eastbourne. 1967. Page 10. <https://theanarchistlibrary.org/library/guy-debord-the-society-of-the-spectacle.pdf>

³³ Debord, Guy. *The Society of the Spectacle*. Soul Bay Press. Eastbourne. 1967. Page 13.

³⁴ Debord, Guy. *The Society of the Spectacle*. Soul Bay Press. Eastbourne. 1967. Page 118.

³⁵ Debord, Guy. *The Society of the Spectacle*. Soul Bay Press. Eastbourne. 1967. Page 119.

“reduces our lives into a daily series of commodity exchanges.”³⁶ To begin to live a fulfilled, content, and rich life, one must first distance themselves from the forces which hinder their ability to live freely.

In Conclusion

This paper explored three core topics: the way in which traditional Japanese craftsmanship and zen buddhism regard craftsmanship and possessions, archaeology and the influence of time on objects, and lastly, the perspective of Guy Debord on consumerist culture and materialism. While seemingly disjointed, these core topics and their subtopics all lend new insight into our treatment of objects defines us as a broader culture of consumers. My greatest takeaway from this research process is the simple fact that the objects we choose to buy, collect, and produce - be they out of necessity or want - say a great deal about us as people. Over the course of the past 200 years, Western culture has shifted from a lifestyle of less to one of excess. This reality is not necessarily a bad thing, in fact I imagine it is indicative of human progress; most Americans today can feed, clothe, and house themselves, and “survival” is not on the forefront of our minds. Our collective focus has been recentered, and we now live with the intention of *enjoying* life, but have done little to truly contemplate what brings us contentment. We have become passive consumers of goods and products, accumulating more and more without consciously examining their necessity, because we can. I do not believe that all people should immediately abandon their worldly possessions, but I encourage a societal effort to thoroughly examine the value and meaning of the objects we own. It is said that the things you own come to own you, but I think this phrase doesn't take into account what I think is most essential when talking about possessions. The things you own serve as a record of you as an individual - a reflection - defining you in a way that cannot be articulated through language. What do the things you own say about you? And what do they say about us as a culture?

³⁶ Morgan, Tiernan. Purje, Lauren. An Illustrated Guide to Guy Debord's 'The Society of the Spectacle' Hyperallergic. August 10, 2016. Web. <https://hyperallergic.com/313435/an-illustrated-guide-to-guy-debords-the-society-of-the-spectacle/>

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