

CURATOR'S CHOICES: VALUING OBJECTS

WISCONSIN HISTORICAL SOCIETY, 1996

NOTE: This document was produced by WHS curatorial staff to articulate the most important reasons for collecting some artifacts. It serves to focus decision making rather than as a catch-all rationalizing to acquire any artifact.

Historical museums preserve the past by collecting artifacts they feel merit a place in public memory. The process of deciding which objects are worthy of preservation is a subjective one. Museum curators examine the construction, design, condition, use, function, and history of potential acquisitions and evaluate the objects to determine whether they are significant. Museum curators use a number of criteria, described below, to assess the significance of artifacts. In using these criteria to judge artifacts, curators often show their own biases about history and about the place of objects in the study and interpretation of the past.

ASSOCIATION (The Object as Relic)

History museums traditionally have collected objects that are affiliated with important people and events. Sometimes such mementos do not tell us much about the individuals and events with which they are associated, but people value them as relics that offer tangible links to well-known historical figures and incidents.

AESTHETIC QUALITY (The Object as Art)

Like art museums, history museums have collected visually appealing objects with the discrimination of art critics. Such artifacts demonstrate the skills, tastes, and creativity of their makers and are prized as objects of beauty and products of exemplary craftsmanship.

RARITY (The Object as 'Gem')

Like many private collectors, museums have valued some objects because there are relatively few of their kind. Many people believe that scarcity makes artifacts all the more precious and extraordinary. Although unique objects sometimes do not reveal a great deal about the past, they do carry a certain degree of prestige because few people have them.

NOVELTY (The Object as Curio)

History museums have collected objects that arouse people's curiosity because they are strange, unusual, bizarre, humorous, odd, or exotic in some way.

TYPICALITY (The Object as Specimen)

History museums have collected some objects because they are commonplace. Ordinary artifacts are valued because their pervasiveness reflects and represents the experiences of many people in a given region, culture, or socioeconomic group.

ANTIQUITY (The Object as Antique)

History museums value some objects simply because they are old. In the United States, anything dating to the colonial or Revolutionary periods is considered "antique" and is precious for its link to a distant past. In Wisconsin objects predating the Civil War carry this distinction.

SYMBOLISM (The Object as Icon)

Some objects are significant because they feature visual representations that symbolize the values and worldviews of the people that made and used them. These objects are imbued with meaning that transcends their obvious functional value. They reflect the collective imagination of the society from which they came and help to create a sense of family, community, or cultural identity.

EVIDENTIAL VALUE (The Object as Document)

History museums value some artifacts because they serve as tangible evidence of things that happened or provide explanations about how things were done in the past.

PRIMACY (The Object as Milestone)

History museums treasure some objects because they were among the first of their kind. Such objects mark important milestones in technological, social, economic, or stylistic development. They are particularly appealing to those who see history as a chronicle of progress and achievement.