

JOHN CARMAN

**PROMOTION TO HERITAGE:****HOW MUSEUM OBJECTS ARE MADE**

The English expression ‘museum piece’ has two meanings. Its overt and straightforward meaning is that of an object that is, or that deserves to be, preserved and made available to an audience for their edification and delight. The other meaning is ironic – that the object is no longer of any use, and that it is old-fashioned, dysfunctional, and needs to be disposed of. What is interesting about the phrase is that in both senses – the overt and ironic – it emphasises the non-utility of the object: in the straightforward sense, it is something to be removed from the everyday and placed in the care of an institution whose task it is to preserve it for posterity; and in the ironic sense, it is to be discarded. This expresses the special nature of objects in museums: that they leave the functional everyday environment of use and are placed in a special environment where they serve an entirely different purpose, are treated in a very different way, and are consequently thought about and understood in a new way. The process is one of removal from the mundane world, in which things decay, to a special realm where things exist in perpetuity.

**PROMOTION TO MUSEUM STATUS**

Studies of museums that emphasise the visitor, tourist, audience, and customer response to exhibitions and displays rarely address the preceding question: why do people visit museums at all? Rare attempts to answer this question in turn founder on the complexities of the educational differences between social categories and degrees of relative poverty. Nick Merriman’s important UK study was able to establish that even non-visitors to museums

displayed an interest in the past (albeit a different one from frequent visitors: Merriman 1991: 22 and 127–129). However, he was unable to identify the source of that interest. This section will attempt to address that question by taking as its starting point an idea that I have addressed elsewhere (Carman 2002: 96–114) and that has been reasserted by Merriman (2004): that the public nature of museum collections is precisely its separation from visitors and tourists. Such an idea is usually interpreted to mean that museum objects have been appropriated from the public and put to selective use at the service of a social elite (e.g. Smith 2006). There is, however, an alternative way of understanding this: that museum objects instead represent something beyond the individual, which is not reducible to mere questions of individual or sectional ownership. It is instead a form of corporate saving by the community, and such saving, as Mary Douglas and Baron Isherwood (1979: 37) put it, develops ‘a full-fledged otherworldly morality, for the [community] outlives its members’. In drawing on ideas about value from anthropology, philosophy, and sociology, a different way of understanding museum collections can be derived.

### **Michael Thompson and Rubbish Theory**

Thompson (1979) introduces the notion that there are three categories of value into which any material can be placed: *transient* things are those of which the value is decreasing over time; *durable* things are those of which the value is increasing over time; and things with no value are *rubbish* (Thompson 1979: 7–9). At some point in their career, transient items are likely to find that their value has dropped to zero, at which point they become rubbish. Rubbish is interesting material because, in general, it is a category of objects deemed by cultural convention to be invisible. Rubbish consists of all the unpleasant and nasty things that we do not wish to think about or to discuss and that, when we do encounter them, we look away or pretend that they are not there. Those rubbish objects that force themselves onto our consciousness despite our best efforts are upsetting and dangerous: they are materials out of place, which challenge our conceptions of how things should be arranged (Thompson 1979: 92). This makes rubbish doubly interesting, for items that were once transient and have become rubbish can re-emerge from invisibility, challenging our assumptions about the world and forcing us to reclassify them and accordingly re-ordering our world (Thompson 1979: 45).

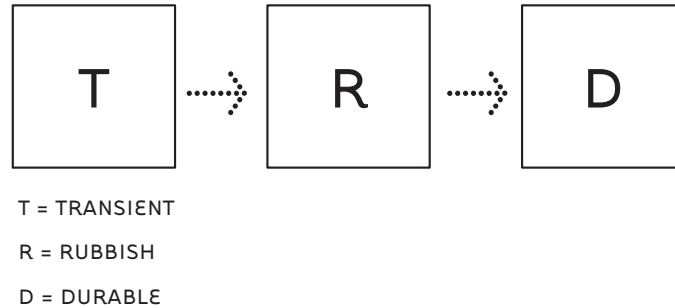
Thompson’s insistence on the strict application of his narrow definitions of the three value categories are important to the scheme, for they determine the kinds of movement from one value-category to another that can and cannot take place (Thompson 1979: 45). Since durable objects have a constantly increasing value, they cannot become either transient or rubbish, both of which require falling value. Transient items are decreasing in value and so can become rubbish, but they cannot become durable, which de-

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mands increasing value. Rubbish has no value, and accordingly the value cannot fall: rubbish cannot become transient objects. Transient items, however, can become rubbish since their declining value can ultimately reach zero; and rubbish that does not, by cultural convention, exist can become durable if it is manipulated and reworked to re-emerge from invisibility into our consciousness so that a new value can be placed upon it. Thompson lists several examples of this process: an old car, inner-city housing (transformed from a slum to a period townhouse by the actions of ‘Knockers Through’), Stevengraphs (a kind of Victorian kitsch decoration), and the country house at Grange Park in Hampshire (Thompson 1979: 13–18, 19, 40–50 and 96–98).

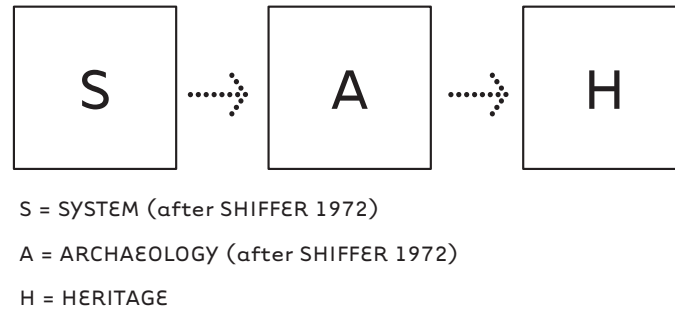
In its delineation of transfers from one value category to another, Thompson’s theory of the role of rubbish in turn mirrors the route by which material enters the concern of the museum curator. In the particular context of archaeological material, Michael Brian Schiffer (1972; 1987) outlines the process by which objects cease to be part of a ‘systemic context’ in the past and enter the ‘archaeological context’ as refuse, from which they are retrieved by archaeologists in the present: such material may then become part

Figure 1: THE RUBBISH THEORY TRANSITION TO DURABLE



of an archive (frequently on deposit in a museum) or part of a display in a museum case. This process is identical to the transition from transience to durability via rubbish delineated in *Rubbish Theory* (Carman 1990: 196). In the past, ‘systemic context’ objects have a transient use value: they are made, used, re-used, and disposed of. Once disposed of as refuse, they may be classified as rubbish; at some point, they will in any case *become* rubbish in Thompson’s terms since they will cease to be visible. This may be because of the physical circumstances of disposal (what Schiffer calls an ‘N-transform’, by which natural processes affect the physical fabric of the object, causing it to be damaged or buried) or because of deliberate deposition in a location in which it is invisible (such as a grave) and subsequent forgetting (*per* Schiffer a ‘C-transform’, or cultural process) (Schiffer 1972). Once invisible and forgotten, the object is part of Thompson’s *rubbish* category. Upon retrieval, the ancient object is given a new value in a new context. It becomes important as a means of approaching the past. This is the transition from rubbish to durable, from ancient remnants to something that we call heritage (Carman 1990; 1996).

Figure 2: ARCHAEOLOGY AND RUBBISH THEORY



### Jean Baudrillard and The political economy of the sign

Baudrillard identifies four contemporary ‘codes of value’ that he designates by convenient abbreviations (Baudrillard 1981: 125) and which, he argues, occupy spaces in the different socio-economic realms of production and consumption (Baudrillard 1975). Use value (UV) and economic exchange value (EcEV) represent values operative in the realm of production, and also the realm of traditional political economy, where ‘objects are primarily a function of needs and take on their meaning in the economic relation of man [sic] to his environment’ (Baudrillard 1981: 29). Sign exchange value (SgEV) and symbolic exchange value (SbE), however, represent values operative in the realm of what he calls ‘the political economy of the sign’, representing ‘the value of [the] social prestation of rivalry’, which he distinguishes from that of *economic* competition (Baudrillard 1981: 30–31, emphasis in original).

Baudrillard further identifies twelve possible conversions from one value code to another, all of them occupying spaces in one or other of these realms or providing for the transfer between them (Baudrillard 1981: 123–125). Of these, only two (UV–EcEV; and its reverse EcEV–UV) represent the processes of political economy – the conversion from use value to exchange value and back, which is the equivalent of the commodity phase in an object’s life cycle (Appadurai 1986: 15). A further conversion (UV–SbE) represents the promotion of material to the symbolic realm: this includes such processes as the gift-giving of special items such as engagement-rings (Baudrillard 1981: 61–69), public and official presentations, the potlatch, and the art auction (Baudrillard 1981: 112–122); it coincides with the notion of the movement of items into the space of the museum as in *Rubbish Theory* (Thomp-

Table 1: AN EXTRACT FROM BAUDRILLARD'S CONVERSION TABLE

Value transformation	Description	Realm of activity
<b>UV – EcEV</b> <b>EcEV – UV</b>	Use value – economic exchange value Economic exchange value to use value	POLITICAL ECONOMY
<b>UV – SbE</b>	Promotion to symbolic value	
<b>SbE – UV</b> <b>SbE – EcEV</b> <b>SbE – SgEV</b>	Return from symbolic value	COST/BENEFIT ANALYSIS

VALUES

UV = use value; SgEV = sign exchange value; EcEV = economic exchange value; SbE = symbolic exchange value (Source: Baudrillard 1981)

son 1979). Three further conversions (SbE–UV; SbE–EcEV; and SbE–SgEV) represent the reconversion of symbolic value to economic/use value: this is ‘the inverse of consumption: the inauguration of the economic, a “cost [benefit] analysis” of the various codes of value’ (Baudrillard 1981: 125). It will be evident from this that the conversion of values between the economic and symbolic realms and within the symbolic realm is a much more complex process than that in the economic realm, which reflects the difficulty of understanding cultural heritage as a public phenomenon, which is the aim of so much research in the field (Carman 2000).

It is in the conversion of use value to symbolic value that the museum object is created. Things promoted to a special status such that they require to be treated differently from other classes of material occupy space in the realm of symbolic value. The realm of symbolic value – that of Thompson’s (1979: 103–104) ‘durable – withdrawn from circulation’, ‘eternal object’, and consequently the ‘heritage’ – is ‘not the sanctification of a certain object.... It is [always] the sanctification of the system [i.e. the category into which the object is placed] as such’ (Baudrillard 1981: 92). It represents a radical rupture of the field of value in which all other value codes are negated (Baudrillard 1981: 25). This is a realm of a generalised code of signs (Baudrillard 1981: 91), a ‘transgression of use value’ (Baudrillard 1981: 127, emphasis in original) so that any one object at once stands for any other object and simultaneously stands for the entire class of all actual and potential objects. This is a description of the symbolic power of the museum collection as a modern public phenomenon, unlike that of traditional political economy, which is the antithesis of the public realm of symbolic value representing the private domain of everyday life.

### Pierre Bourdieu and Distinction

In criticising Kant's philosophy of aesthetics, Bourdieu's (1984) *Distinction, a social critique of the judgment of taste*, attempts to relate the kinds of material world that are inhabited by different classes of people in France to their social and economic position. He defines the latter in terms of various kinds of capital that they have acquired by birth or during their life – economic (financial), cultural, educational – and relates this to the kinds of houses they live in, the work they do, the films and music they most admire, the kind of food they eat, and finally the newspapers they read and the politics they subscribe to. From this perspective, the two meanings of the term culture ('the restricted, normative sense of ordinary usage [on the one hand], and... the anthropological sense [on the other hand]') (Bourdieu 1984: 1)) are brought together and the appreciation of art and culture generally becomes a function of social position. For Bourdieu

the sacred sphere of culture, implies an affirmation of those who can be satisfied with the... distinguished pleasures forever closed to the profane. That is why art and cultural consumption are predisposed... to fulfil a social function of legitimating social differences (Bourdieu 1984: 7).

Economic and cultural capital can be acquired in a number of ways: by birth, gift, or work. Together they represent aspects of one's *habitus* (or habitual way of acting in the world). Those born to wealth and privilege inherit not only economic capital in the form of money and property, but frequently also a seemingly natural sense of good taste and culture. Those born to the educated may inherit a sense of good taste and a knowledge of culture but not necessarily a great deal of economic capital. Those born to the rural poor are likely to inherit little of both. The process of formal education can increase the stock of cultural capital available, but this acquired taste and culture is (or at least in 1960s France, was) considered less worthy than that inherited at birth; the same often applies to the new money wealth of the tradesperson compared with that of the aristocrat. The least valued is the acquired cultural capital of the autodidact or self-taught person, which can claim neither to be the product of birth nor of conventional formal education (Bourdieu 1984: 85).

In the same way that some forms of personal wealth can be considered more worthy than others, such as inherited versus earned wealth, different forms of cultural capital are also often held to be more legitimate than others. The two forms of capital are thus alike. Moreover, they are convertible into one another. A person with wealth can purchase a greater measure of cultural capital by taking part in expensive cultural pursuits. Here, Baudrillard's designation of the art auction as a 'social prestation of rivalry' that he distinguishes from that of a realm of strictly economic competition (Baudrillard 1981: 30–31, emphasis in original) finds its referent: and of course the mu-

seum curator who purchases objects in the market is also actively presenting their ability to judge cultural significance to the world, not their wealth. Alternatively, wealth can buy a child's entrance into a prestigious educational establishment where legitimate good taste and culture can be acquired. At the same time, a high social position and its attendant stock of cultural capital but which carries no financial benefit may lead to employment with high earning potential and little actual labour. While the internal dynamics of each form of capital is identical, they nevertheless represent very different material expressions; but the relations between forms of capital also allow for their mutual transformation.

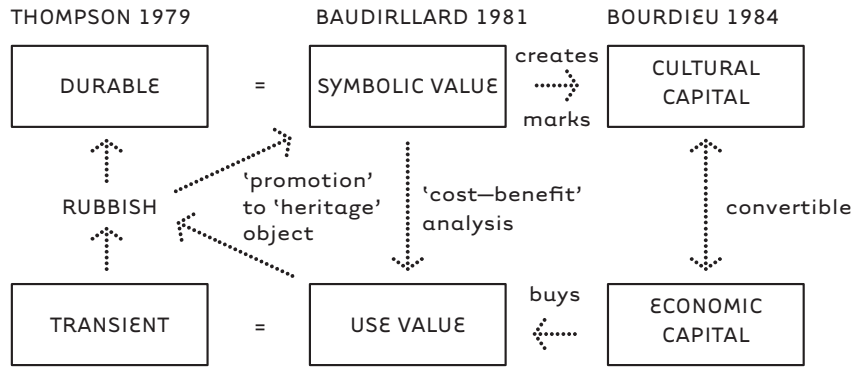
### Museum values

There are certain structural similarities between all three of Thompson and Baudrillard's ideas on value and Bourdieu's on forms of capital. Each scheme distinguishes at least two forms of their object, which represent different spheres of activity. At the same time, each scheme allows the transformation of one form into another. Since museum collections are here considered as material transformed out of the ordinary realm into that of another, special domain, it presents an opportunity to combine these schemes into a single system that aims to say something about the nature of museum objects. Central to this combined scheme is the notion of promotion, since museum objects have effectively been promoted out of the everyday world into that of the museum. In Thompson's scheme, 'durable' items are of higher status than 'rubbish' or the 'transient', since durable items are those with constantly increasing value. The more complex and abstract 'symbolic' realm of Baudrillard stands apart from that of economics, and is a space not of competition between equals but rather of 'tournaments' between rivals for social status (Baudrillard 1981: 30–31). From the perspective of cultural capital, mere economic capital represents the tawdry everyday rather than the higher appreciation of things of taste. In each case, the placing of an object in the category of the durable, symbolic, or cultural represents its promotion to a higher realm. These values are equivalents in terms of the categorisation of objects, and represent the status given to art and culture, the components of public heritage, including, at their heart, museum collections.

Cultural capital is the measure of appreciation of the symbolic value carried by the museum object, while economic capital allows the purchase of economic utility. The 'durable' and 'transient' values of *Rubbish Theory* (Thompson 1979) equate with Baudrillard's (1981) 'symbolic' and 'use' value realms, and the dynamic of *Rubbish Theory* provides a model of the process by which the conversion is achieved (see also Carman 1990). Objects with symbolic value both mark and serve to create a stock of cultural capital, and the conversion of cultural capital to economic capital is the process by which the symbolic value of the object becomes (by Baudrillard's 'cost-benefit



Figure 3: PROMOTION TO MUSEUM STATUS



analysis’) converted to use value that is capable of purchase. Economic capital (as financial wealth) allows the purchase of any commodity, including those with symbolic value. Here, the link between the various elements – capital and value – is access to either the capital itself or to the object carrying the appropriate value and representing the store of that capital. This extended model of the value schemes not only provides for the identical internal dynamics of each component and their mutual conversion within each scheme, but also their conversion across schemes of value. It is the transfer from one value-realm to another that lies at the heart of the creation of the museum object: and emphasises the fact that these objects are indeed *made* (albeit cognitively rather than materially) rather than merely *recognised*.

### ACQUIRED VALUES

If we accept this process whereby objects are promoted into the museum out of the ordinary, everyday world and their acquisition of new values, the question arises as to what these newly-acquired values are. This chapter suggests that there are three such values, each of which interrelates to the others in order to provide the aura that museum objects acquire.

#### Authenticity

Museum objects are held to be, in some sense, real. That is, it is deemed that they represent what they purport to represent, that they are proper versions of the class of object that they claim to be, and that they were not manufac-

tured simply to be mounted in the museum case (the latter would be replicas; and while it is not the purpose of this chapter to argue that replicas have no place in the museum, there are few – if any – museums in the world that will present replicas without admitting that they are not the ‘real thing’). In this sense, they are held to be authentic – not false, not fake.

As Tim Schadla-Hall and Cornelius Holtorf (1999) demonstrate, however, the notion of authenticity is a variable one and differs depending on context. They point out, for instance, the different measure of authenticity applied in aircraft circles from that of archaeology: a modern reconstruction of a now-disused aircraft from original plans and perhaps incorporating parts that were made at the time, but never included in a flying aircraft, will be considered perfectly authentic by aircraft enthusiasts; but to an archaeologist, such a reproduction is merely a flying replica, since an authentic such aircraft must have flown at the time such planes were current (Schadla-Hall and Holtorf 1999: 238–239). On the other hand, they emphasise the role of experience in establishing authenticity as a characteristic (Schadla-Hall and Holtorf 1999: 230, 236), reflecting Baudrillard’s (1981) discussion of simulacra: that the experience of a simulacrum is a real experience, but not an experience of ‘the real thing’. The experience of the museum object in the museum, of course, is just that – an experience of a museum exhibit, not of the object in its original context of production, use, or discard. Accordingly, while one can have an authentic experience in a museum, it is not an authentic experience of what the museum purports to demonstrate.

### Age

A related characteristic of the museum object is that of its supposed antiquity. As discussed above, museum objects have left the realm of utilitarian existence and entered a realm in which they are considered no longer available for use. In that sense, they always represent the past in some form – even though the object itself may be one otherwise still in common use. Both David Lowenthal (1985: 242) and John Tunbridge and Gregory Ashworth (1996: 8–9) point out that it is the assumption of age that is the critical factor, not actual longevity. The same principle applies to the museum object as to ancient monuments, which (at least legally) in Britain can be of any age: what matters is the ascription of other value (archaeological, historical, aesthetic, etc.) that allows the monument to be classed as ancient – and, therefore, worthy of preservation (Carman 1996: 112–113); on this basis, material from a mere few decades ago have been preserved as ‘ancient monuments’ alongside those from several millennia.

In a similar vein, when I was the curator of a small museum in the Fens of Eastern England in the early 1990s, the collection of ditch digging equipment that was on display – some of them representing types of tools that

were still in use – were described by a visiting schoolteacher as similar to those seen on television in a programme about African farming: the clear implication was that these were obsolete objects that were fit only for use by those living in the past. This is an example of what Johannes Fabian (1983) has called the ‘temporalisation’ of space, whereby those more distant from us geographically are rendered further back in time. The museum object is separated from us by being removed from the ordinary world of familiarity and use: placed in a museum case or on a museum wall, or in the reserve collection away from visitor contract altogether, it becomes something different and alien and, therefore, removed from us in space and time. Museum pieces – as in the ironic use of the phrase highlighted above – are inevitably deemed old.

### Cultural significance

Objects in museums are held to be of some cultural, archaeological, historical, or aesthetic significance. The reasoning, however, is a distinctly circular one: only those objects of such significance are held in museums; it, therefore, follows that a museum object must have this particular characteristic. Elsewhere (Carman 1996), I have argued that objects are given value rather than represent those that are immanent in them, and that is especially the case with archaeological material (an opinion generally shared by other archaeologists: see Briuer and Mathers 1996). It is the idea that lies at the heart of the model of value as presented above, whereby objects are promoted out of the everyday realm of functional utility to a place where they are preserved, kept away from those forces likely to result in their damage (such as exposure to air and light, and regular handling) and cared for in perpetuity. It is this special treatment that gives them the value they are ascribed, rather than the value they possess that requires this special treatment. Museum objects, therefore, acquire cultural status rather than merely represent it: here again, we see the active creation of heritage as a contemporary process.

### **THE MUSEUM OBJECT LAID BARE**

What, then, distinguishes the museum object from any other thing that we might encounter in the world? Essentially nothing distinguishes them – except the existence of one in the location of the museum and the other’s existence beyond its walls. By entry into the museum – by becoming ‘a museum piece’ – the object acquires characteristics and qualities that it previously did not possess: it becomes authentic by virtue of its eligibility for entry into the museum collection; it is rendered old by its removal from everyday use; and it acquires cultural significance by being placed among other such objects in the museum collection. This process of promotion from one

realm of thought and practice to another is what happens to all objects that find their way into public collections: even those objects specifically made for the purpose (such as art objects) go through a process of entry into the collection, which marks them as worthy. The specifics of the process are those that serve to define the institution making the collection: museums are known by the activities that take place within them: the holding of collections for research and education, the making of displays, and the public exhibition of those displays. Museums make the objects that they hold just as much as the holding of collections makes a museum. However, the unpacking of the museum as an institution, and interpreting its practices, is the task of others in this volume and elsewhere.

**JOHN CARMAN** obtained his PhD from Cambridge University in 1993, studying the role of law in the construction of understandings of the archaeological heritage, and has since lectured and published widely in the field of Heritage Studies. He is currently a University Research Fellow and Senior Lecturer in Heritage Valuation at the University of Birmingham.

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