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FROM THE GUEST EDITORS



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Senta German and Jim Harris 

ABSTRACT

In this article, the authors argue that the art-historical canon, however it is construed, has little relevance to the selection of objects for museum-based teaching. Their contention is that all objects are fundamentally agile and capable of interrogation from any number of disciplinary standpoints, and that the canon of museum education, therefore, consists in the entire contents of the museum. The article seeks to define the quality of agility in objects and discusses the selection of materials for teaching on that basis. In order to sustain the development of object-based learning in university museums, the authors argue that it is necessary to train a cohort of teachers able to use objects imaginatively and well, and they outline a training course for faculty, *Agile Objects*, aimed at equipping them to do so.

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Introduction

We encountered the complexities and possibilities of cross-disciplinary teaching with objects at the Ashmolean Museum in the University of Oxford, as inaugural Teaching Curators in the museum's Andrew W. Mellon Foundation-funded University Engagement Programme (UEP). It is one of the many and varied object-based teaching programs in Europe and the U.S.A. that share the centering of the object in university study and an approach that poses objects as flexible or agile in their pedagogical application. This article discusses the selection of objects for teaching and outlines a curricular program, *Agile Objects*, aimed at equipping scholars to use them, but its ultimate focus is precisely that: the agility of museum objects in pedagogical practice.

We believe that the greatest potential of objects for teaching resides not in their relation to a canon assembled according to any particular set of intellectual criteria, such as those of art history, nor as “live” alternatives to textbook illustrations, but rather in inviting the broad transection of an object's use and meaning across time and any number of disciplines. We see the starting point for teaching with objects not in the accumulated, existing knowledge they embody but rather in their capacity to submit to new investigation by students to whom that embodied knowledge is either unknown or irrelevant. In short, the object is not a passive receptacle for information but an agile tool for creative thinking and learning.

Approach

Oddly enough, it is often the case that an object that is utterly unknown to students can be the most useful in teaching. Thus, for object-based learning, the art-historical canon, the

received knowledge about the historical progression of styles and artists (however constructed) is not particularly helpful. Since, in this context, the range of meanings an unknown object might take on constitutes its value, the idea of a canonical group of objects valued for other reasons – aesthetic or technical quality, attribution, historical association, intrinsic worth – ceases to have pertinence. We regard every object as useful for teaching and learning, so the “canon” of museum education, if there is one, must include the entire contents of whatever museum is being used to educate.

The origins of our approach to object-based learning comes in part from the inspiration of existing theoretical and practical work but also from our own professional habits. Theoretically, and most generally, our work might be considered part of the “material (or object) turn” which occurred in the humanities at the turn of the millennium. In the case of the study of art and material culture, this was manifest in a renewed interest in close observation and, at least in part, a turn away from other, less material-centred theoretical paradigms which had dominated the field for some three decades. In this vein, the work of James Elkins¹ and Jules Prown² have been important to the situation of our work within a university and museum context. More practically and pedagogically, we have benefited greatly from the work of David Wiley³ and Helen Chatterjee,⁴ as well as the diverse experiences of many U.S. colleagues at college and university art museums as described by Corrine Glesne for the Samuel H. Kress Foundation.⁵

Teaching with objects in a higher education context

A focus on object-based teaching and learning in the particular setting of higher education necessarily impinges upon the traditionally text-led pedagogy of most university programs. Any discipline, including those dealing in pure science, mathematical abstraction or the study of images relies, to a greater or lesser degree, on texts to transmit ideas. Even in an age where the printed page is no longer necessarily the vehicle for that transmission, the library, real or virtual, remains at the center of knowledge exchange. However, we argue that the museum provides the opportunity to teach that the written word is not, in fact, the only vehicle for articulating or embodying an idea. Even so, no matter how useful a museum’s contents, or how straightforward the essential principles of object teaching, based in careful looking and the fundamental priority of observation over inference, their application remains a forbidding prospect for many scholars whose work is not involved with material culture.

An object embodies a complex network of ideas that can be read and understood either as a connected whole or as a series of discrete articulations, each susceptible to any number of angles of enquiry. These networks can seem difficult to unpick, the more so if it is imagined that every object needs to be fully understood under every examination. The key is to acknowledge that it cannot, and instead to enable teachers to approach the museum and its contents not from the point of view of the curator or conservator but according to the investigative priorities of their own subject. This liberates museum objects from the hierarchies of value and meaning imposed by that small group of fields from which the curating profession has traditionally been drawn, for example history, art history and archaeology. It is why, like the wider art-historical canon, their “canon” as museum curators is not ours as museum educators.

Choosing objects

How, then, starting from every item in a collection, do we go about choosing objects for teaching? Are they all equally useful? And how do we identify and exploit their agility? The essential criteria, as we see it, are these:

- Objects should be sufficiently complex as to demand sustained engagement. This complexity can be manifest in two or three dimensions and be structural or content-based but it should place the onus on the viewer to unpick from the various details of the object an understanding of the whole.
- Objects whose function is not immediately clear, puzzles that refuse to present themselves too readily, ensure engagement through the multiple interpretations that will have to be explored to assign identity and reveal meaning.
- Objects that are fragmentary and/or damaged encourage the student to consider the physical history and long narrative of an object's life, the kinds of roles it may have played as artwork or tool, for example, or as a collector's piece, an embodiment of different kinds of value over time.
- Objects made from more than one material enable discussion of process – the construction and manufacture of things – and meaning. The raw materials of an object connect it outwards and backwards into the multiple interactions of trade, industry, craft, sale and distribution which brought it into being, into the marketplace and into use.

Almost all museum objects manifest at least some of these qualities. However, there are, in addition, three characteristics shared by every object in every museum, which ensure that any group culled from any collection can be turned to the purposes of instruction in any number of disciplines.

- Museum objects are fragmentary and decontextualized – they lack something, whether they are physically damaged or have simply been moved.
- They have been recontextualized, according to the intellectual program of the museum into whose collections they have made their way, and given new meaning within that specific organizational and interpretive system.
- They survive – they represent a tiny fraction of the tiny fraction of the material output of any given society that lasts beyond its intended functional life to take on a new existence as a curiosity, an artwork or an exemplar of the lost mass.

To give an example, among the most consistently useful teaching objects from the Ashmolean reserves has been a small, battered, copper-alloy pyx: a container for reserving the eucharistic host ([Figure 1](#)).⁶ To the non-specialist, its function is not immediately obvious; it is fragmentary, clearly not in its original context and has survived in spite of an evidently checkered physical history. It has suffered damage and loss: it is out of shape, its hinges are broken and much of its color is gone. It comprises a number of materials: alloyed copper and tin, enamel and gold. It is complex, decorated with text and with designs neither fully abstracted nor straightforwardly figurative.

The pyx has a sister on display in the museum, whose condition is excellent. Its lid remains attached, its gilding and enamel are intact and its imagery is more legible. It is



Figure 1. Pyx, gilded copper alloy, champlévé enamel, Limoges, c. 1200–1250 CE; Ashmolean Museum of Art and Archaeology, University of Oxford.

a far better example of its type than its sibling but the very wholeness and clarity that make it suitable for inclusion in the Ashmolean’s “canonical” displays make it a less rewarding object for investigation. The damaged pyx is mysterious, but careful examination makes it accessible. The loss of gilding, for example, has revealed hidden details of construction and evidence of use. Its consequent agility as a teaching object is reflected in the number of disciplines in whose service it has been deployed, including medicine, business, geography, theology and English, and in the questions they have asked of it (Figure 2).

An analogous object is a conquistador stirrup from the collections of the University of Wyoming Art Museum used during inter-disciplinary discussions held in Laramie as part of a UEP visit in December 2014 (Figure 3).⁷ During several days of conversation with faculty members from, among other departments, anthropology, kinesiology, philosophy and biology, the stirrup served as a focus for exploring the potential of object teaching in a collection and at a university very different from the Ashmolean and Oxford. Objects such as this, or the pyx, selected according to the four criteria suggested above and interrogated in light of their three-fold shared characteristics as “museum content” can be discussed in terms as wide as the academy itself, in all of its disciplines, departments, faculties and divisions. They are truly agile.

Agile teaching

How, though, can the agile object help to develop agile teachers? This has been one of the questions exercising the Ashmolean Museum’s UEP over the past several years. The Ashmolean, born from the collections of the two John Tradescants, gardeners and botanists, and the antiquarian Elias Ashmole, has been a teaching museum since its foundation in 1683. Its curators have been (and remain) leading teachers, in archaeology, for example, ancient history and art history, often helping to define which objects are or are not to

Interrogating disciplines: neuroscience, history of art, theology, classics, psychiatry, history of science, medicine (general practice), business, Italian, geography, history, English literature, German

Interrogating themes: iconography, value, raw materials, manufacturing process, technique, function, physical history, devotion, markets, trade routes, style, collecting

Interrogating raw materials: copper, tin, lead, zinc, cinnabar, metallic mercury, gold, glass, cobalt, alum, iron sulphate, wood



Figure 2. Interrogating an agile object: the Ashmolean Limoges Pyx.

be regarded as “canonical.” However, since 2012, the UEP has been developing partnerships in subjects previously outside the scope of Ashmolean teaching, as the museum has sought to widen the use of its collections in its parent institution.

Employing a category of academic new to Oxford, the teaching curator, the program began by seeking to make connections with individual faculty members. By developing those relationships, the teaching curators have worked in, among others, the departments of modern and medieval languages, anthropology, geography, history, neuroscience, psychiatry, mathematics, English literature, classics, oriental studies, international development, business and archaeology. The result has been new teaching and new research at the undergraduate and graduate levels, delivered in stand-alone classes designed to support core curricula; seminars and workshops for graduate students; individual tutorials; revision classes; and through the development of entirely new courses. For instance, in compulsory first- and second-year Classics and Ancient History courses, students now meet in study rooms in the Ashmolean Museum to handle and study objects (e.g. ceramic and metal vessels, small-scale bronze and marble sculpture, stamp seals and fragments of wall painting) which pertain to four core examined areas of inquiry: social class, love and luxury, drama and Persian vs. Greek identity. The School of Geography and the Environment has now embedded museum-based teaching into the Heritage Science and Conservation elements of its undergraduate degrees. In this case, students examine museum display in the galleries of the Ashmolean to develop theses on topics such as human migration, social response to environmental change and the politics of site conservation. The Department of Psychiatry has used the UEP and the contents of the Museum to teach not only students during their clinical rotation in the field but also practicing psychiatrists at Resident and Attending level, for whom the Ashmolean has become a key focus for professional development. For her work with the UEP, Dr Charlotte Allan, then of the Department of Psychiatry and now a Consultant Psychiatrist in the National Health Service, won the 2014 Educator Innovator Award of the Association for the Study of

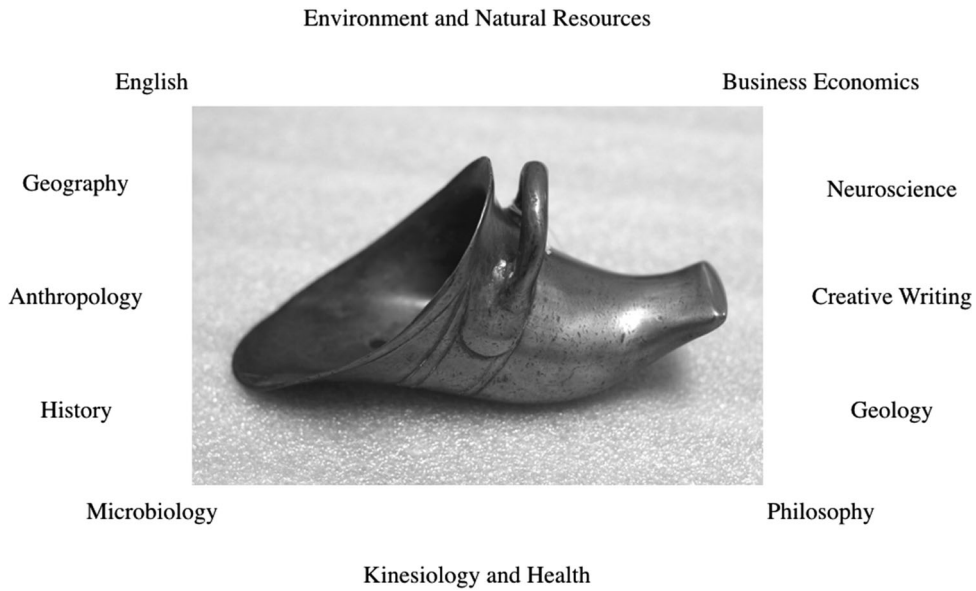


Figure 3. Disciplines interrogating a nineteenth-century brass conquistador stirrup; University of Wyoming Art Museum, Laramie Wyoming.

Medical Education.⁸ The teaching of the UEP earned its members the Academic Services and University Collections Teaching Award for 2015 and, according to the University of Oxford’s own website, “has dramatically changed the way in which students and staff can access and learn from the Ashmolean’s collections.”⁹

As its teaching remit has expanded, however, the UEP has inevitably been constrained by physical and staff resources and it has become increasingly important to consider how its work might be sustainably embedded in the university. What museum teaching needs, alongside its own specialists, is more teachers, in every discipline, able to exploit the potential of a museum’s collections for themselves and to advocate for the value and efficacy of object-based teaching. This in turn requires what amounts almost to an evangelical movement – the mobilization of a corps of activists possessing a transferable, practical skill-set for object-based teaching. Our mechanism for achieving this was to develop a training course, which we called *Agile Objects*.

The Agile Objects course

The *Agile Objects* course is rooted in the practicalities and possibilities of cross-disciplinary teaching, seeking to provide its participants with the basic tools needed to choose useful objects, understand the potential thematic connections between them and to conceive, plan and deliver classes using them. It cultivates skills of agility in teaching through the use of agile objects, and encourages the view that the museum is a natural environment for learning. The course is focused on a group of 20 objects from the collections, chosen to represent a variety of media, functions, techniques, periods, cultural origins and types of content. These objects anchor 4 taught sessions addressing questions of principle, practice and context and requiring participants to devise 2 teaching exercises: a

collaborative, thematic class, using 4 of the 20 objects to address a single, cross-disciplinary idea, and a gallery teaching session to be delivered alone.

The structure of the course is broadly:

- (1) *Close Encounters with Objects? Looking and Handling in Museums*
 - Handling objects of different types
 - Conservation issues raised by object handling
 - When not to handle
 - How to look
 - The primacy of observation over inference
 - Written assignment: 500 word object description
- (2) *Contexts for Teaching with Objects*
 - Where can you teach with objects?
 - In what courses can you teach with objects?
 - How can the same objects speak into more than one discipline?
 - How can diverse objects simultaneously address a single theme – class, gender, devotion, economic networks?
 - How do curatorial policy and display strategy affect what we learn from objects?
 - How can gallery teaching accommodate the challenges of the public space – school-children, groups of casual visitors, extraneous noise or members of the public who wish to join in?
 - Assignment: with a partner, plan a lesson on an assigned theme, using objects from the Museum.
- (3) *Teaching in the Study Room*
 - Deliver and discuss lesson plans
 - Plan a short teaching presentation around an object on display in the galleries
- (4) *Teaching in a Museum Gallery*
 - Deliver and discuss gallery presentations

By the end of the week we expect the students to have acquired:

- (1) A grasp of the fundamental skills of object handling and the varying conservation issues posed by objects in a range of media.
- (2) A basic knowledge of museum and curatorial practice, expertise and duty of care to their collections, as a starting point for building relationships with curators.
- (3) An approach to objects conditioned not by ideas of their canonical importance, period, style or illustrative value but by their potential for critical interrogation.
- (4) An understanding that the size or type of a collection matters less than the imagination and creativity brought to it by the teacher.
- (5) A recognition of the inter-disciplinary potential of this mode of teaching and learning.

Using this curriculum, remarkable and wide-ranging lesson plans have been developed. A historian and an art historian built an introductory session for undergraduates in economic history around a tiny, experimental, Rembrandt etching and a mysterious stone sphere of uncertain date and function but evidently once a tool before being becoming

a collector's curio. Two English Literature PhDs used an anonymous, Renaissance drawing of the Virgin and Child and a bronze plaquette of Bacchus and Ariadne to plan a graduate seminar exploring how devotional images were appropriated as objects of purely aesthetic interest by late nineteenth-century authors. Another literary scholar, working with an Islamic Art specialist, devised a class about time, using a teapot, a silver bowl and a piece of Roman sculpture, which came to form part of an undergraduate course on the nineteenth-century novel.

Whilst the format of the course has been refined and reformed, central to the success of *Agile Objects* has been demonstrating to the participants that in order to perform well, teachers do not have to seek out especially valuable, beautiful or remarkable things. Their teaching resources do not need to be "canonical"; in fact they have ignored any canonical approaches to these objects in favor of using them for their maximal agility.

Conclusions

Just as a text might permit any number of readings without the need to privilege any one in particular, so the questions asked of an object by each discipline need not establish a hierarchy of engagement or adhere to a particular canon of meaning. Rather such an interrogation opens an array of ideas implicitly present in the materials, techniques, geography, chronology, iconographic content, physical history, ownership and display of the thing at hand.

In this, the multi-disciplinary use of objects in teaching, such as we have outlined in *Agile Objects*, serves both the museum and the object, because it encourages apprehensions of collections beyond the capacity of museum professionals alone to encompass fully. When we use objects to teach outside the traditional disciplines of visual culture, we enlist the whole academy, not only in the project of understanding the objects themselves, by encouraging scholars to engage with them in research and their own teaching, but also in the reading of the wider, the widest possible, assemblage of intellectual, practical, aesthetic, economic, political, sociological and other histories they encapsulate.

These diverse readings are not only reflective of methodological distinctions within a single discipline such as art history, but of the interests of different disciplines altogether. We believe that this is of vital importance to the museum. Much of what happens in museums today is conceived in relation to their multiple audiences and aimed at cultivating new ones. Teaching with objects, though, is not just about making the collections newly accessible to wider audiences. It is about making those audiences and all their diverse fields of expertise accessible to the objects, in order that they might be better and more fully understood.

This kind of thinking about objects is fruitful for any museum. It activates a range of expertise on the objects' behalf, stimulating not only teaching and learning but useful research. For the university museum, whose audiences are largely drawn from students and faculties, this is especially important. Contrary to appearances, these audiences are not captive. There are many university museums and galleries under-appreciated on their own campus and in an economic climate where such resources are often seen as a luxury, lack of visibility is unsustainable. To embed themselves fully in the lives of their universities, and to justify the investment they require, these museums must attract and hold as many of their potential audiences as possible. By expanding an object's value beyond its "canonicity" by reaching into new academic disciplines, by

making a potential teaching resource of every broken, dull, forgotten box, foxed print or stone sphere, museums can do this and, furthermore, acquire access to new realms of expertise and understanding.

Still, objects represent an unfamiliar kind of text to many scholars and one not easily translated. Teaching teachers to work with them, to undertake that translation, is therefore a far more fundamental project than mere curricular enhancement. It enlists the scholarship of previously unconnected colleagues and, by extension, the intellectual capital of the entire academy to unravel the networks of meaning embodied in museum objects in new and exciting ways. By cultivating teachers who can build bridges between their own scholarly and pedagogical practice and a museum's collections, by enabling them to identify new canons of objects pertinent to their own fields of study, rich and mutually beneficial relationships between museums and their host communities are seeded.

Recognizing the potential of the agile object and making a colleague of the agile teacher enables the museum to take its place alongside the library and the archive as a resource for sustained intellectual engagement. The *Agile Objects* course, as a new contribution to museum education, locates that engagement not only in current practice but in teaching yet to be developed, in new avenues for research and in the creation of an academic generation for whom there is no dichotomy between the study of material culture and the exegesis of the written word. And in this, the museum reassumes the role it played when the Ashmolean first opened in the seventeenth century: a place to understand the world rather than simply to gawp at it.

Notes

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5. Glesne, Corrine. *The Exemplary Museum: Art and Academia*. 2013.
6. WA1946.104 Pyx; Limoges, thirteenth century; gilded copper-alloy pyx with foliate enamel decoration, angels and IHS and Chi/Rho monograms on lid.
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