

Tangible Things: Making History through Objects

Erika Doss
University of Notre Dame

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tion of Mexican borderlands was well under way. In Reynosa and other border towns, migrants filled factories and lived in slums.

The surge in border manufacturing shifted employment from rural to urban areas. The North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) of 1994 took away protective import tariffs and speeded up the loss of Mexico's small-scale farming. Subsidized U.S. grain flooded the Mexican market and swept rural laborers off the land. The displaced workers headed for the booming border factories as the only hope for a livelihood. Low wages, high turnover, and deskilling characterized the Mexican labor scene. The rise in wages, per capita income, and trade promised by NAFTA promoters on both sides of the Rio Grande has proved largely illusory.

While Broughton's ethnographic study tells the story of how multinational corporations changed the lives and landscapes of two cities — Galesburg and Reynosa — it also provides a unique and moving account of the human consequences of economic globalism. "With economic globalism," Broughton writes, "companies like Maytag had found a way to slough off not only union wages, pension obligations, taxes, and regulations, but also any sense of obligation to the place where they made their money" (155).

Broughton believes that America's rising inequality results not from inevitable and intractable market forces but rather from a political system that rewards businesses and harms workers. By contrast, European countries have publicly funded labor and social policies in the areas of wages, health care, skills-building, retirement, and unemployment. Such policies can provide employers with flexibility and workers with more economic security.

The book closes without the benefit of a collective profile of the workers. Yet Broughton remains true to his goal of chronicling workers' views on economic issues. Nuanced, moderate, and insightful best describe the account.

Tangible Things: Making History through Objects, by Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, Ivan Gaskell, Sara J. Schechner, and Sarah Anne Carter, with photographs by Samantha S. B. van Gerbig. New York: Oxford University Press, 2015. xvii, 259 pp. Illustrations, appendix, notes, index, companion website. \$39.95 paperback.

Reviewer Erika Doss is professor of American studies at the University of Notre Dame. Her most recent book is *Memorial Mania: Public Feeling in America* (2010).

Midwestern artist Scott Hocking explores the artifacts of modern urban detritus. Excavating discarded objects found in the postindustrial ruins

of cities like Detroit and St. Louis, many located in landscapes where Native American earthworks and burial mounds once stood, Hocking reuses these things to make monumental, site-specific, and temporary installations. “Detroit Midden Mound” (2008), for example, featured a huge pile of rusted machine parts and other tools reassembled on the floor of a deserted automobile factory, while “Glove Mound” (2010) consisted of thousands of industrial-strength rubber gloves heaped together in the abandoned parking lot of an empty chemical plant in north St. Louis. Making art out of stuff he discovers in destroyed and defunct places, thereby colliding the histories and memories of the past with the present, Hocking prompts us to ask what we value over time. What things do we consider worth keeping, and why? What do the things we keep and collect tell us about ourselves and how we understand the world?

Tangible Things probes the same questions and considers many more. A coauthored book that began as the catalog for an exhibition at Harvard University in spring 2011, which itself originated in a series of small research seminars conducted by Laurel Thatcher Ulrich and Ivan Gaskell that used material culture “as entry points into history” (xi), *Tangible Things* aims to understand the past through its material and physical records, its art and artifacts. Examining a diverse range and body of material sources – from pre-fifteenth-century textile fragments found in the Spiro Mounds in Oklahoma and twentieth-century walrus ivory carvings made by Inuit artists in Canada to the oil paint-encrusted palette used by American artist John Singer Sargent in the late nineteenth century and a soft red cotton dress worn by a Radcliffe College field-hockey player in 1925 – the authors of *Tangible Things* consider “how Westerners have distinguished, named, sorted, grouped, gathered, and subsequently deployed material things in order to make knowledge claims about them and the emergent concepts their users have associated with them” (7–8).

Their inquiries focus on items drawn from 17 different collections at Harvard, an institution that has been collecting things for almost 400 years (the university was founded in 1636 and its Museum of Comparative Zoology alone holds more than 21 million specimens today), but their mandate invites scholars in multiple disciplines to seriously consider how physical objects are relevant in today’s digital age. Beyond situating things as meaningful markers of how particular social, cultural, and political attitudes are shaped and directed, their project further critiques how things shape and define disciplinary categories. Driven by a healthy degree of museological soul-searching, the authors of *Tangible Things* deconstruct how institutional collecting practices in

the nineteenth century, for example, rigidly distinguished certain things from others, separating “art” objects from handcrafted goods, anthropological artifacts, and scientific specimens. Ultimately, this historically informed project aims to synthesize the relationships that exist among objects, classification, and institutional power in interesting and provocative ways.

Tangible Things features an introduction and four sections: “Things in Place,” “Things Unplaced,” “Things out of Place,” and “Things in Stories—Stories in Things.” Each section consists of case studies from the “six fundamental categories” (15) into which things have been classified since the nineteenth century: anthropology and archaeology, art, books and manuscripts, history, natural history, and science and medicine. If they reinscribe such categories, the authors also destabilize them by discussing the multivalent and mutable character of things—juxtaposing seemingly unrelated items like corn cob pipes and computers, for example, and critiquing abiding cultural assumptions of distinctions between “art” and “craft” in their scrutiny of a ceramic plate painted circa 1878–1882 by Cheyenne warrior Nock-ko-ist (Bear’s Heart) for the Gilded Age tourist market. Samantha S. B. van Gerbig’s color photographs significantly enhance the project, and her essay explaining the difficulties of documenting often banal or mundane things (“fill the frame,” she advises, [194]) is, like all the essays in this collection, engaging and well written. A companion website (requiring a password) gives readers access to 406 alternative and enlarged images not included in the text.

Importantly, *Tangible Things* asks how university and college museums—and by extension archives, libraries, and museums of all kinds—might work more efficaciously to engage the public in an understanding of material-based histories. Hierarchies of taste and value remain dominant today. Recognizing how “tangible things”—from urban industrial detritus to the objects collected in Harvard’s museums—contribute to those hierarchies is crucial to a critically informed citizenry.

Water and What We Know: Following the Roots of a Northern Life, by Karen Babine. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015. xi, 219 pp. \$17.95 paperback.

Reviewer Barbara J. Dilly is associate professor of anthropology at Creighton University and an Iowa resident. Her research and writing focus on, among other things, rural communities and sustainability.

Karen Babine argues for a revisionist cultural history of the northern Midwest in terms of natural environments, landscapes, and climates.