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S. Pearce's model for studying objects and its application to a baptismal cross

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Abstract: *This paper applies S. Pearce's model for studying objects to a family heirloom, a baptismal cross. This model is a mnemonic device, not a system of inviolable rules. Furthermore, it is shown that the interpretative process needs to encompass not only information about the object, but also a new perception of the range of philosophical and technical concepts that shape the interpretation of material culture. It is also necessary to stress the understanding and applying the theory of the model for studying objects, realising the degree to which discussing objects contributes to and illuminates different aspects of material culture, given that learning is influenced by personal elements, too, as demonstrated by contemporary museum studies and studies of material culture.*

Purpose: *To contribute to the study of material culture, as well as to explore the possibility of delving deeper into a number of its fields through a single object.*

Design/methodology/approach: *To apply S. Pearce's model for studying objects to a family heirloom.*

Findings: *The unexpectedly rich interdisciplinary approach that emerged from the study of an object with no "museum" value, as well as its capacity to "narrate" stories.*

Practical value: *Understanding and applying the theory of the model for studying objects, realising the degree to which discussing objects contributes to and illuminates different aspects of material culture, given that learning is influenced by personal elements, too: one's interests, inclinations, the manner in which one prefers to learn, etc., as demonstrated by Falk & Dierking [1].*

Originality/value: *Examining how an object, using S. Pearce's model for studying objects, a foundation stone in the study of material culture, can be perceived through a broader and more interesting feel for its inherent meaning, instead of exclusively through its narrow morphological sense, remains relevant.*

Index Terms — material culture, museum studies.

I. Introduction: Objects as records of material culture

As, in the context of the postmodern conception of material culture [2,3], the relativity of the value of objects is globally acknowledged and, too, the fact that there are no "pundits" who determine their rating scales[1], there is a growing interest in everyday objects with a particular meaning for their owners.

Figure 1. Baptismal cross

One such example is the baptismal cross examined in this paper (Fig. 1), which is a case study of S. Pearce's model for studying objects, itself the basis for the study of objects as records of material culture by other disciplines, such as Archaeology, History, Museology, and in areas such as the management of museum collections (Fig. 2).

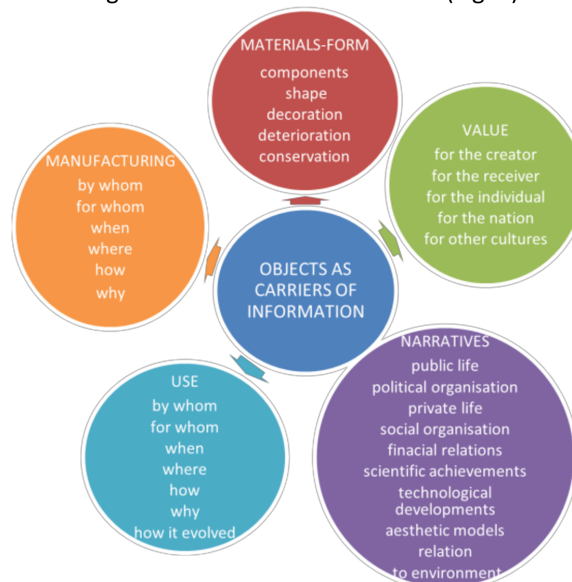

Figure 2. Objects as carriers of information.

Source: D. Kyriaki-Manessi, K. Kyprianos, A. Tranta, A. Koulouris, *Βιβλιοθηκονομία και οργανισμοί πληροφόρησης στον 21ο αιώνα* - Library science & information centres in the 21st century, Athens: Kritiki Publications, under publication, ISBN: 978-960-586-354-8.

"Objects, like ourselves, have a finite lifespan, although their lives are frequently much longer than ours are. There is a moment when each object is

[1] A "hierarchical scale of civilisations" of this nature is reflected in J. Stephanoff's painting, "An Assemblage of Works of Art in Sculpture and Painting", which adorns the cover of J. Mack's book [4].

"finished", that is, when the manufacturing processes necessary to its creation have been completed. As it moves through time, it acquires (to a greater or lesser extent) a history of its own, passing from one possessor to another, perhaps from one kind of use to another, and from one place to another. Some objects, especially those to which special values are attributed, have very long and complex life cycles" [5, p. 25].

Why *are* objects significant? Adopting the concept of reading as a means of interpreting material culture, where it parallels a reading text in terms of semiotics [6], the objects ordinary people make and use in their daily life are the most important documents they leave of their passage in this world, so that, if we learn to understand (to 'read') what objects can tell us, then can shed light on many aspects of these people's life, personality, strengths and weaknesses, on their thoughts, on their perceptions, on what they consider valuable and important, on how they shape their world, says Hennigar-Shuh [7]. "Spend some time learning to look at things," he goes on to suggest. In the broadest sense, any cultural phenomenon (whether tangible, intangible, simple or complex, an event or an object, in other words anything that can be carrier for recording messages) is considered as being a "text". The book *1000 Extraordinary Objects* (Taschen, 2000) illustrates the concept of telling of stories through objects by proposing one thousand miscellaneous everyday objects that reveal various dimensions of different cultures in a unique way.

II. The value of objects as potential narrators of stories

The value of objects as records and as potential narrators of stories is widely accepted in the museum community, as «objects are at the root of the concept of museum. They are at the centre of each exhibition, as […] they are the starting point for elaborating the exhibition scenarios […] on the basis of the "real" object's value as a carrier of information" [8, p. 68]. Through objects, people structure their relation to the material world [9]; they acquire ties to stories and events, as well as to the people and societies that created them. Objects are records that allow us to study the people and the period, the society and the conditions in which they were created. The Museum is considered as being a repository of knowledge and information, primarily with objects, remnants of material culture, playing a key role in the effort to understand and represent the world. The collection and display of objects of diverse origins and functions aim to create an image of the world. It is because of this that M. Foucault defines museums and libraries as "places of heterotopia", that is to say spaces containing other spaces, an element that characterises Modern Times[2] [10, p. 7]. This means that museums contain objects of different eras which are displayed in the same space. Thus museums often "condense" the narration of the world's history through objects they have in their collections[3]. A well-known example of displaying personal items in a museum exhibition is that of "The People's Show" [11]. Other interesting examples are those of temporary exhibitions centred on the stories told by immigrants through their personal belongings; we first come across this trend in the Museum of London's exhibition titled "The peopling of London" [4], which brought together oral memories collected through interviews with immigrants, an element that simultaneously marks another trend of the time: the preservation of the intangible cultural heritage. Similarly, in the exhibition "Keys to Memory" organised by Sweden's Malmö Museums and which opened on International Museum Day in 2000[5], the objects on display were not traditional museum pieces but personal items, the idea being that each object told a story, which its owner recounted in an interview. The exhibition-installation titled "The Key in the Hand" displayed at New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art is also of particular interest. In the words of the critic presenting it: «Within the 2015 Venice Art Biennale's Japan Pavilion, artist Chiharu Shiota has amazed visitors with an extraordinarily immersive presentation. Using two boats, vibrant red yarn, a net of interlaced metal, and more than 50,000 unique used keys, Shiota created "The Key in the Hand", an exhibition meant to inspire viewers to think about the importance of memories and the unknown. The display features the intertwined keys hanging over the boats on bright red yarn and onlookers are able to walk beneath the maze on a winding path. The tens of thousands of keys were collected from individuals across the globe, helping to unite them in a common project. "Keys are familiar and very valuable things that protect important people and spaces in our lives. They also inspire us to open the door to unknown worlds. With these thoughts in mind, in this new installation I would like to use keys provided by the general public that are imbued with various recollections and memories that have accumulated over a long period of daily use. As I create the work in the space, the memories of everyone who provides me with their keys will overlap with my own memories for the first time. These overlapping memories will in turn combine with those of the people from all over the world who come to see the biennale, giving them a chance to communicate in a new way and better understand each other's feelings," explains Shiota in her initial message when asking the public to donate keys»[6]. We can draw examples from Greek museums from two temporary exhibitions. The first, titled "People and icons:

[2] The existence of the very concept of museum is founded on "the idea of accumulating everything, of establishing a sort of general archive, the will to enclose in one place all times, all epochs, all forms, all tastes, the idea of constituting a place of all times that is itself outside of time and inaccessible to its ravages, the project of organizing in this way a sort of perpetual and indefinite accumulation of time in an immobile place, this whole idea belongs to our modernity" [10].

[3] See, for example, http://www.bbc.co.uk/ahistoryoftheworld/about/british-museum-objects/ (last accessed: 30/4/2020)

[4] N. Merriman (1995). Hidden history: the Peopling of London project, *Museum International*, 47:3, 12-16, DOI: 10.1111/j.1468-0033.1995.tb01249.x (last accessed: 30/4/2020)

[5] MIME Migrating Memories. - A Case Study from Malmö Museums, Swedenhttp://icme.mini.icom.museum/wp-content/uploads/sites/16/2019/01/ICME_2005_millinger.pdf (last accessed: 30/4/2020)

[6] Artist Collects 50,000 Keys Across the Globe for An Immersive Exhibition on Memories - https://mymodernmet.com/chiharu-shiota-the-key-in-the-hand/ (last accessed: 30/4/2020)

Refugees' heirlooms" and held at the Byzantine and Christian Museum in Athens (27.6-29.8.2009), highlighted important milestones in the journey made by people with their relics from their countries of origin to the countries of their new settling, from the early 20th century to the present. These objects, accompanied by documents, archival photographs, oral testimonies from refugees and Museum staff and audio-visual material, were brought together to create the exhibition's environment[7]. The second exhibition titled "Demetris Koilalous – CAESURA, the duration of a sigh" and held at the Benaki Museum's premises on Pireos Street (27.3-26.5.2019), was a photograph exhibition centring on the transitory state of the refugees and migrants who arrived in Greece in 2015 and 2015 after crossing the Aegean Sea[8].

III. S. Pearce's model and the case study

While models for studying objects had been elaborated before, the one that prevails as being the most complete is that of S. Pearce [5, Appendix]. It is a mnemonic device, not a system of inviolable rules, as she herself admits, which examines how the viewer can apprehend an object not in its narrow morphological sense, but in the broader and more interesting sense of its inherent significance [5, p. 367]. When applying this model, emphasis is placed on the need to broaden the interpretative process so as to include not only auxiliary information about the object, but also a new perception of the range of philosophical and technical concepts that shape the interpretation of material culture [5, p. 372], while also accepting that the value of an artefact is interpreted differently by each observer [5, p. 375].

The object comprises material, history, surroundings, significance

1. Material-process of making and ornamentation
2. Material-design/pattern of the material, decoration
3. Material-characterisation a) origin, b) industrial techniques
4. History: a) its own history, b) subsequent history, c) practical function
5. Surroundings-microenvironment, macro-environment
6. Surroundings-object's siting/location
7. Significance
8. Interpretation

I chose to attempt using S. Pearce's model to study a family object, a baptismal cross [Fig. 1, Fig. 5], that recounts moments from the story of a family's past, of *my* family's past, "in ways which would otherwise be impossible" [5, p. 76], since, as very characteristically expressed, objects are "external souls: external, because physically distinct and separate, but souls because the meaning projected on to them brings them into the interior of our personal lives" [5, p. 73].

A. *Material- ornamentation*

The cross of this article's case study (photograph) is made of a thin sheet of gold with suspension loop at the top. Its total height is 4.35 centimetres (including the suspension loop of 0.7cm), while its width is 2.9cm and its weight is 2.70g. The colour of the gold is a reddish yellow. No carats are mentioned, because at the time it was made (in the early 1930s in Athens) it was not customary to stamp jewellery according to its content in pure metal, as became the case later on.

B. *Material-design/pattern of the material, decoration*

Its arms are slightly flared, almost trapezoidal, each ending in an almost semi-circular extremity. At the arms' intersection, there is a circular inset for a ruby with a diameter of 0.4cm, cut into facets. There is a hole on the reverse side, presumably in order to allow the light to reflect its red colour.

C. *Material-characterisation*

Appadurai defines the commodity situation in the social life of any 'thing', this typical element in the capitalist order of things, as "the situation in which its exchangeability (past, present, future) for some other thing is its socially relevant factor" [12, p. 13].

Figure 3. Gold cross with ruby in the centre Paul and Alexandra Canellopoulos Museum, Athens (Greek Jewellery. 6000 of Tradition, catalogue n° 211).

It should be noted that "most communities ascribe considerable value to artefacts made from bright and flashing materials, like gold, pearl shell, colourful feathers or ivory, and this value rests as much in the lust of the eye as it does in the comparative rarity of these materials. Rarity is, nevertheless, in itself a source of value (...) [and] gold is, geologically, a relatively rare material on earth. Also, it is an incorruptible metal with an intrinsic luminosity that makes it shine, while its yellow hue is reminiscent of the sun. This allusion is encountered in the crescent-shaped jewellery discovered in Northern Europe [13, p. 171]. Contrary to the Mycenaean world, where gold was probably limited to a social elite, in Western Europe it seems to have played a role in the religious practices of society as a whole [13, p. 171]. The fact that it occurs in a natural form and that in this form it can be hammered easily contributed to its use in making jewellery from as far back as the Late Bronze Age, when it was already associated -a linkage encountered throughout time- with the ruling class: in the rich Varna Necropolis, in

[7] See https://www.byzantinemuseum.gr/en/temporary_exhibitions/older/?nid=1020 (last accessed: 30/4/2020)

[8] See https://www.benaki.org/index.php?option=com_events&view=event&id=5914&lang=en (last accessed: 30/4/2020)

Bulgaria, the man buried with an impressive number of gold coins and bronze tools must have been a chieftain or a priest [14, p. 29, ill. 6]. The number of gold artefacts dating back to the Neolithic era in Greece more than doubled following the arrest of an antiquities dealer in 1997 with a treasure of 54 gold ornaments from around 4500 to 3200 BC [15]. Ever since, throughout time and in all civilisations, gold has been a symbol of prosperity and economic power, while until recently the value of money was backed by a gold equivalent. Rubies are second only to diamonds in terms of mineral hardness on the Mohs scale, with a hardness of 9. Along with sapphires, they belong to the corundum group, a variety of minerals composed of aluminium and oxygen (Al^2O^3). More specifically, a ruby is corundum in which the Al^{3+} in the crystal lattice have been replaced by Cr^{3+} ions, which is why it has an intense red hue [16, p. 232]. Depending on their content in chromium and iron, rubies can be all possible shades of red: from pink to orange and from red through to maroon. The most sough-after hue is a clear red, called blood-red. The etymology of the word refers to the Latin term *ruber-rum*, which means red. The most important deposits are in Upper Myanmar (Burma) in the Mogok Valley, but other important mines also exist in Thailand, Sri Lanka and Tanzania. Only around 1% is suitable for the jewellery industry. Large rubies are scarcer than large diamonds. The stones of a clear, transparent quality are cut into shapes σχήματα με έδρες, while less transparent rubies are cut into "cabochon" (a particular cut without facets resulting in a smooth domed surface, usually of a circular or oval shape). World-famous rubies include the Edward's Ruby (167 carats) at the British Museum of Natural History in London, the Rosser Reeves Star Ruby (138.7 carats) at the Smithsonian Institute in Washington DC and the De Long Star Ruby (100 carats) at New York's American Museum of Natural History[9].

D. History

The cross is inextricably linked to Byzantine iconography, although it already pre-exists from Minoan [17, p. 96, ill. 36:E] and Mycenaean imagery [18, Motive (FM) 54]. In Ancient Egypt, the charged ankh symbol, which symbolised the power of the gods to sustain life and revive human souls in the afterlife, had a similar shape as can be seen, for example, in an amulet made of glazed faience[10]. As a symbol, it became charged with a special connotation due to Christ's crucifixion and took on the role of Christianity's quintessential emblem. The combination of the ankh with the cross in the Fayum portraits is of particular interest [19]. "Here, [the ankh's] elongated head has become a circle, making the object look like the Greek letters *chi* and *rho*, forming the monogram of Christ". On the shrouds, all these symbols, the hand raised in blessing, prayer or to ward off evil, and the ankh-cross, "coexist with Egyptian imagery (...) are we seeing here a syncretic mixture of faiths?" [19, p. 118]. The combination -which is not considered a contradiction- of pagan and Christian symbols is encountered in other cultures, too, such as in Madagascar, and in particular in rituals relating to death [4, p. 82]. This intermingling may have been the reason for it to acquire, from the early years of Christianity, the role of an amulet among ordinary people [20, p. 158], even though the official church condemned the notion of talismans and charms. In the writings of the Holy Fathers it is stated with a rather ironic tone: *…ουκ οίδας πόσα κατώρθωσεν ο σταυρός; Τόν θάνατον κατέλυσε…τόν Άδην άχρηστον εποίησε… καί εις σώματος υγίειαν ουκ έστιν αξιόπιστος*; (...did you not see how much the cross was capable of? It ended death... it rendered Hades useless... and where the body's health is concerned it is not reliable? See *Patrologia Graeca 49*, v.240). The connection of the cross to baptism dates as far back as the early Christian years. During the first christenings, which were performed on Epiphany Day, the godparent did not offer a gift of a cross-ornament, but red ribbons were wound in the shape of a cross over the convert's clothes. The first baptismal crosses-ornaments date back to the 6th century, such as a bronze pectoral cross, in all likelihood a baptismal one, bearing an inscription on each of its sides: on one side, the inscription is of an apotropaic nature -the "amulet" element is encountered once again- and on the other it ties in with the service of the Great Blessing during the feast of Epiphany [21, p. 498, cat. n°679]. The linkage between cross and amulet is encountered in the crosses-reliquaries, talismans par excellence of the Byzantines, who wore them like a kind of religious pendant hanging on the chest and which contained fragments of the Holy Cross and various other relics [21, p. 188]. During the Middle Byzantine period (843-1204 AD), these religious pendants were the most prevalent object of personal piety. They were used by all social classes and ages irrespective of gender, while their burial function has been documented archaeologically [21, p. 502, cat. n°688]. Also, crosses have been found in cemeteries of the Middle Byzantine period, laid on the sternum of children's skeletons as burial gifts [21, p. 500, cat. n°638, 685]. This could be a distant echo of a much older custom, when "children were protected against harm by amulets worn round the neck; the practice was common throughout the ancient Egyptian, Greek and Roman cultures and continued among Christians" [19, p. 37]. Gold amulets were also common in Roman times [22, p. 173-4]. The belief that the cross both protects and is the bearer of good luck is still prevalent today: let us not forget that on Epiphany Day, the day when, as already mentioned, baptisms took place during the early years of Christianity, whoever catches the cross thrown into the sea during the blessing of the waters is thought to be the recipient of good fortune throughout the year to come.

As has been pointed out, objects almost always have their own, very personal life cycle, a biography, which is not simply linear but, rather, diachronic and multi-layered, which begins at the moment of their manufacturing and stretches out to their most recent (but not necessarily final) use. During each phase of this life, may assume a different meaning and use and becomes charged, accordingly, with the corresponding historical, social and ideological contexts [24, p. 57]. The story of this cross (Fig. 1) begins in the 1930s

[9] See http://webmineral.com/data/Corundum.shtml/ (last accessed: 30/4/2020)

[10] See https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/Y_EA54412 (last accessed: 30/4/2020)

in Athens. Its first owner was my uncle, Ioánnis (Yiannákis) Mariolópoulos (1935-1938), to whom it was given by his godparents at his christening. When he was three, Yiannákis fell ill. His mother, my grandmother Máta (1909-1984), decided not to heed the diagnosis of the paediatrician who had looked after my older aunt, Lilí (1932-2010), and Yiannákis up to then and, influenced by her circle of friends and relatives, decided it was expedient to change paediatrician, considering that a doctor who was “all the rage” would be better than the family practitioner. Irony of fate, the diagnosis of the “better” doctor turns out to be misguided and the child dies. As of that moment, my grandmother wore Yiannákis’s cross continually. Despite going on to have a further two children, my mother, Eléni, and my younger aunt, Danái, she never, ever parted with it: today, judging in hindsight, I believe that the grief at the loss of her child - in any case tragic - was further heightened by her feelings of guilt for choosing the wrong paediatrician. Thus, the cross she literally and figuratively bore represented not only the child she had lost, but also her own path of anguish and guilt. When she, too, died, on 13 May 1984, the cross passed into the hands of Lilí, the eldest sister, as traditionally it is the oldest child to whom befalls the duty of the family’s “continuity”. Having witnessed my particular relationship to my grandmother, who raised me, and being for her the substitute for the child she never had, Lilí gave it to me quite a few years ago. Nobody has worn it since my grandmother’s death, so a certain “sacredness” has been attributed to it, in the sense of the sacred-profane dichotomy, an idea originally posited by É. Durkheim [25].

E. Surroundings-microenvironment, macro-environment

Today, the cross has, in a sense, returned to the time when it was made, as my home, where it is kept, is an apartment in a block of flats of the 1930s.

F. Surroundings-object’s siting/location

Its microenvironment is its small box in the roll-top desk of the same era, while we could consider that its macro-environment is the Christian world and baptised Christians - whether they wear their baptismal cross or not.

G. Significance

The word “cross” as a signifier has many signifieds. It literally signifies the instrument of execution of Jesus Christ, the Holy Cross, and the object that symbolises the Christian faith, but it also has metaphorical meanings as the expression “to carry a cross” denotes the hardships one has to bear. Also, the expression “cross in hand” signifies a person’s honesty, while “to kiss the cross” is to swear something and “to cross oneself” translates a sense of wonder. On a different level, the cross against candidates’ names on the ballot papers indicates the voter’s preference, the Southern Cross is a constellation and the “cross of the sea” is a different name for starfish. It should be noted, too, that the “stavroulaki” or “stavroudaki” (both of them diminutives of “stavrós”, the Greek word for cross) is worn as an amulet [23, 1667]. In the symbolism of gender, the pictogram with a cross on the lower side of the circle is known symbolises the female gender. Additionally, it was customary for illiterate people to sign with the mark of a cross.

H. Interpretation

We have already seen the four owners of this specific cross (Yiannákis, Máta, Lili, myself). Of us all, only Lilí, being older than Yiannákis, knew the trajectory of the cross from the very beginning. My grandmother, Máta, experienced its first two lives (when her child received it and then, after his death, when she did). I have memories of my grandmother, whom I remember wearing it, but I have only heard about the initial phase. With the exception of a few photographs, it is the only object belonging to Yiannákis and is one of the few testimonies about his existence – even his grave, in Athens’ First Cemetery, was lost during the German Occupation.

According to structuralism [2], this particular cross bears the following dualities: child/mother - male/female - life/death - baptism/crucifixion - death/resurrection - despair/hope - joy/sorrow - mourning/redemption - contemporary/old - familial/individual - valuable/cheap.

In this cross, the lives of my grandmother and her children, but also my own, are entwined. It connects us like the links of a chain. In the same way that I, as the penultimate link in this chain, learnt stories about Yiannákis, whom I never met, I hope that my child, too, will wish to learn the story of my grandmother, whom he didn’t get to know. After all, objects relating to the dead may be interpreted emotionally as a sort nostalgic expression of our wish for them to return [4, p. 81].

This paper contributes to the study of material culture, by exploring the possibility of delving deeper into a number of its fields through a single object. It is examined how an object, specifically a baptismal cross, can be perceived through a broader and more interesting feel for its inherent meaning, instead of exclusively through its narrow morphological sense, using S. Pearce’s model for studying objects, a foundation stone in the study of material culture. By implementing S. Pearce’s model, it is shown that the interpretative process needs to encompass not only information about the object, but also a new perception of the range of philosophical and technical concepts that shape the interpretation of material culture.

Figure 5. A case study of a baptismal cross according to S. Pearce’s model for studying objects.

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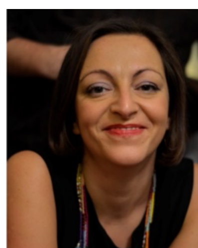
V. Authors



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