

RESEARCH UPDATE

Transitional Objects: The Ucko Collection. A New Heritage Section Joint Research Project

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Introduction

Transitional Objects is an object-based research project initiated by the Institute's Heritage Section, launched in December 2014 and expected to extend until the end of academic year 2015/16. It focuses on a collection of archaeological objects originally collected by Peter Ucko (1938–2007), former Director of the Institute of Archaeology. On his death, ownership passed to Jane Hubert, Peter's partner, who later approached members of the Institute of Archaeology's staff with a desire to donate the collection to a public institution.

The project initially developed from the need to document and assess the collection in order to establish its compliance with UCL's Cultural Property Policy, and determine suitable public collections to which to donate the objects (Chippindale & Gill, 2000; Chase, et al. 2006; UCL 2008a; 2008b). This first stage was conducted in June 2014 and involved documentation (photography, description, condition assessment) of each object and the production of a basic conservation database of object information. At this stage the total number of objects in the collection increased from 64 objects (as initially

identified in the UCL/IOA Object Entry Form) to 79 objects, as some groups of objects were separated and entered as individual items. The resulting database forms the platform for further research.

The initial process of documentation raised questions about the process of decision-making, and the strategy that was to be used to identify and document the objects' provenance, and to establish suitable destinations for their donation. The need to involve different heritage practitioners from the earliest stages became clear.

This coincided in June 2014, with a request for some of the objects to be temporarily lent to artist Cecilie Gravesen, to be incorporated into an artwork commissioned by the Crafts Council. In discussions with the artist, five objects were identified and used in a conceptual piece – *Play for a Handling Collection* – that examines the relationship between objects and users of a loan box through the creation of narrative (Gravesen 2014). The piece was one of the exhibits in the Crafts Council Exhibition *Crafting Narrative: Storytelling through Objects and Making* (Crafts Council 2014), held at Pitzhanger Manor Gallery & House, London, between Sept 9th and Oct 18th 2014 (**Fig. 1**).

The final selection of objects for the artwork was made through dialogue between owner, conservator and artist, and considered the owner's concerns, conventional

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Figure 1: Object 18 (the boatman) being handled as part of *Play for a Handling Collection*, during the Crafts Council Exhibition *Crafting Narrative* (Photo Cecilie Gravesen).

conservation parameters such as object condition, suitability for handling and loan, as well as the artist's requirements in creating a narrative. The use of these privately owned objects, rather than objects from a museum collection, gave a certain freedom to this dialogue, not restrained by museum professional practice. Instead, it meant that each decision had to be justified only within the specific context of the project.

As an example, Object 18 (Ucko's list n.52) is an Egyptian polychrome wood figurine of a man from a funerary boat model. The conservator focused on the fragility of the figurine's painted decoration. The wood itself had been severely attacked by insects that had eaten into the body on the underside. The artist was particularly interested in having this figurine as one of the five objects because of its expressiveness and the possibilities for narrative, but the nature of the artwork required that the objects should be

handled, and there were concerns that this would not be safe for this object. Dialogue between conservator and artist decided on a 'handle-but-not-touch' approach in which the object was packaged in a sealed, clear plastic 'crystal' box and could be 'handled' (in the box) while safely protected. Packaging was carried out to accommodate the artist's desire for the insect damage, associated with the passage of time, so part of the object's history, to be clearly visible. The packaging solution was designed by the conservator to reduce the risk of handling damage, whilst meeting the artist's requests, and resulted in the figurine lying on its side as if on a bed, its head resting on a comfortable support pillow (**Fig. 2**). Thus the dialogue contributed directly to the artist's creative process in developing the narrative for *Play for a Handling Collection*.

Matching the perspectives of the owner, object conservator, and conceptual artist was a creative process that raised questions about



Figure 2: The boatman figurine packaged for handling. By lying on his side the termite damage remains clearly visible (Photo Carmen Vida).

perception and the establishment of value, significance, provenance, memory making, and narratives, and ideas about handling and curation. It revealed the possibilities of creative use of heritage, and the potential of cross disciplinary object-focused dialogue.

As a consequence *Transitional Objects* has evolved into more ambitious interdisciplinary collaborative project – one that is focused on navigating and mapping the process of transition of objects from privately owned things to heritage objects in public collections.

Aims and Expected Outcomes of the Project

The project aims to critically reflect on the values and conventions that guide heritage decisions and practice, through examination of the process of ‘museumification’ of Peter Ucko’s collection. Its transition from the private to the public sphere offers a cross-heritage theme to identify, examine, and share heritage research methods. It is hoped that this will raise questions about the agency of people, place, and process in creating museum objects, and will involve us in exploration of a very wide range of concepts such as collecting, development of narratives, donation, conserving and un-conserving, and heritage artistry. *Transitional*

Objects is not simply a study of ‘museumification’ but a deeper and more critical look into heritage practice.

Charting the objects’ transition will provide heritage practitioners with an opportunity to reflect on the processes and values that underpin and inform their own decisions, and to assess and challenge their subsequent practice. The tangible product will include advice to the owner on possible futures for the objects, which will include the consideration of creative as well as more traditional uses of heritage objects and their potential for teaching, research, and engagement.

Dean Sully, Stephen Quirke and Beverley Butler are directing the project, assisted by Jane Hubert (Honorary Senior Research Associate), Cecilie Gravesen (Honorary Senior Research Associate), and Carmen Vida (Research Assistant).

The Collection

The objects in the Ucko Collection are mostly archaeological Egyptian and Near Eastern antiquities collected during Ucko’s early years (Butler & Rowlands, 2006). The collection is a reflection of his interests at the time but also of what was accessible to him as a collector in the late 1950s and early 1960s (Ucko, 1998; 2001). The objects range in

date from predynastic to Roman and include ceramics, flints, metal, glass and faience beads, amulets and shabtis, resin figurine casts, and a decorated wooden shabti box. A typed catalogue of the collection with 125 entries (some for individual objects, some for groups of objects) was compiled by Ucko. The list is undated and only partially corresponds to the 79 objects being studied by in the project. At an early stage, the project hopes to link the objects in the collection's database to Ucko's typed list, and to follow these links to establish the original provenance of each object. The '*Ucko Collection*' is composed of different collections made at different times and in different places, and containing either similar or dissimilar objects. In terms of categorisation, the *collection* is transitional and current definitions of it as something discrete and definite are likely to dissolve and reform in the process of generating heritage collections from it.

The Project's first 6 months

To date, the conservation documentation has been completed and entered into the project's database. This includes physical description and photographs, and basic object information such as materials, and an assessment of object condition.

A preliminary matching of the objects to those in Ucko's list has also been completed with the help of experts in Egyptology and Near Eastern material culture (Stephen Quirke and Rachael Sparks) and the project's database has been updated. This in turn has highlighted the need for further interdisciplinary research into each object that will enable us to establish its heritage 'value' and potential.

Two seminars were held at the Institute, in December 2014 and March 2015, for staff and students in which the objects could be viewed and the project discussed with a view to identifying possible interdisciplinary sub-projects. During the March seminar, Cecilie Gravesen discussed her work *Play for a Handling Collection*, and the artwork was set up in the Institute so that those interested were able to view and interact with it. Two workshops for

students have also taken place: a session with Museum Studies students led by Dean Sully and Carmen Vida, focused on museum and curatorial documentation and the process of 'museumification' of objects, and a session for students in the Cultural Memory course, led by Cecile Gravesen and Beverley Butler, focused on the creation of memory through heritage objects and narrative.

Work ahead

The project's next stage will focus on further refining the identification of objects with those in Ucko's list and on establishing the objects' past and original provenance more securely. Linked to this is the wider issue of what defines the heritage value or potential of an object, and how this may be established by typology, condition and provenance. It is expected that further research will be articulated through a series of small-scale projects, involving heritage staff and students, that will address from different perspectives:

- Agency in heritage: the creation of values and narratives
- Ethics of objects' acquisition
- Provenance as adding value
- Acquisition policies and documentation within collections
- The life enhancing value of heritage: contemporary interaction with heritage objects in the arts, through handling and therapeutic uses.

It is hoped that the research projects will involve specialists in the following subject areas: conservation, artefact studies, museum studies, and technology and analysis of archaeological materials. It should also be possible for other interested groups to become involved.

These projects will stimulate dialogue between different heritage practitioners about their different approaches to these objects in particular, and to heritage in general. They will also help to construct an operative heritage value of each object in the Ucko collection, so that decisions can be made on its most appropriate next destination.

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