INTRODUCTION

Thinking with Things

How can we approach aspects of the past that written words do not record? How can we mobilize not just a few kinds of things that have survived from earlier times, but many, to create history? If we acknowledge that material things of many kinds are traces of the past, how can we make use of them to understand the past? What are the circumstances that shape our encounters with them, and how do those circumstances affect—perhaps even determine—how we might use them? As historians working with material things, these are among the puzzles we face. These are our concerns in this book.

We did not write this book in isolation. It represents the culmination to date of a long-term investigation. It reports on an experiment we conducted at Harvard University in the spring of 2011 involving the use of material things of many kinds—from medical specimens to artworks. The fact that we did it at Harvard does not mean that others cannot try their own experiments with less extensive collections. The issues involved are certainly not confined to one institution, nor do we believe that one need have access to a world-class collection in order to employ the strategies it adapted.

We have discovered through our own experiences as writers, researchers, museum curators, college professors, and leaders of workshops for museum professionals, public school teachers, and the general public that focusing on a single object can generate excitement, prompt historical curiosity, and produce understanding. Of course, having access to a dazzling set of material things is a great advantage, but as television
programs like *Antiques Roadshow* or the *History Detectives* remind us, dazzling things sometimes show up in ordinary places, and, as good poets know, common objects when looked at anew have a dazzle of their own.

*Tangible Things* builds upon a rich tradition of practice and theory in material culture, as well as on our own experiences as scholars and teachers. Specialists will recognize in these pages a number of issues that have been debated in universities and museums in recent years. Although we have entered into these arguments by offering some philosophical speculations in general terms, we have chosen to focus our efforts in this book primarily through case studies, believing that in many circumstances example really is the best teacher. In contrast to more traditional works, our topic is not the evolution of particular objects or forms over time, but rather a method of investigation that begins with a specific artwork, artifact, or specimen and then moves outward in an ever-widening circle.

The things we discuss are not the unbounded things of recent “thing theory,” but rather definite physical entities. To call something a “thing” rather than an “object” in certain disciplines indicates that it may have inanimate or numinous qualities. For these practitioners and philosophers, we recognize that the word “things” evokes resonances that “objects” does not. Although we pay close attention to the nuanced meanings of the material world, we have chosen to adhere to widespread convention and use the terms “object” and “thing” interchangeably.

Because we are historians, our primary approach is historical. But our engagement with tangible things has led us beyond the boundaries of our own discipline and our own specialized knowledge. We want to argue here that just about any tangible thing can be pressed into service as primary historical evidence. Our purpose is not to offer comprehensive accounts of each field to which these sources might relate, but to demonstrate that attention to singular, physical things can reveal connections among people, processes, and forms of inquiry that might otherwise remain unnoticed. Our engagement with Harvard’s collections has led us to question the very categories through which we understand history. It has also led us to imagine a university in which museum specialists and librarians might work more closely with faculty to create more engaging and lively exhibits and courses.

There has been a great deal of emphasis lately on the supposed overspecialization of the academy, on the need for university teachers to teach broadly and for meaning, and for specialists to find a way to address the general public. Although it may seem counterintuitive, we actually think
that a good way to broaden knowledge is to narrow the focus. This is one of the secrets of micro-history. Asking students to study an object—any object—almost always leads them in unexpected directions. To take just two examples, a Harvard undergraduate who had never before shown any interest in biology found herself reading treatises on the foraging habits of mice in order to understand the curious presence of a mouse skeleton in a patent medicine bottle from the American Civil War; and a student in the history of science who wanted only to understand the anatomical theories behind a model of the human body suddenly found that she needed to know something about Greek art.

Teaching with tangible things challenges teachers as much as it challenges their students. None of us is simultaneously an expert in Civil War history and mice. But good teachers know how to use libraries, websites, and their colleagues to guide students into areas they do not know. In our case, that meant working closely with the curators, archivists, conservators, and registrars that care for Harvard’s many collections. Teaching in this manner becomes collaborative at many levels. The kind of open-ended inquiry we model here is much easier today that it would have been in the past. The growing willingness of major institutions, including Harvard, to share texts and images electronically makes it easier to connect written and material sources, and to connect objects housed in one collection with another or with the seemingly ordinary things found in people’s bureau drawers and attics. This is not to claim, though, that electronic versions of texts and other objects are invariably adequate substitutes for the things themselves; many puzzles demand attention to those very things—exalted or commonplace—as well as to their virtual representations.

Our description so far might imply that the Tangible Things project is no more than elaborate antiquarianism: an inspection of individually fascinating items in which anyone might take an interest for their own sake, but of little or no relevance to the big picture of historical inquiry. Can Tangible Things fulfill a truly historical purpose by helping anyone who wants to know about the past in order to live critically in the present? Yes it can. We believe that the mobilization of material things can enhance any comprehensive historical inquiry and that the procedures we advocate will enhance knowledge of the past that is too often constrained by reliance on written materials alone.

Historians generally rely on text-based sources, but these are severely limited. Only a minority of human societies has used writing systems.
Even within those that have, many people left few traces, if any, in written form. Oral traditions can be documented and interviews made, but except in the case of various indigenous societies, these verbal records are of recent memory and do not take us very far back. Historians can extend the range and depth of their inquiries by learning to use not just written and oral accounts, but all traces of the past. With appropriate skills to exploit a wider range of sources—material and visual, as well as word-based culture—historians may uncover what would otherwise be undetectable lives, often of the socially disadvantaged; they will also enrich knowledge of those who have been known to a greater or lesser extent solely from written texts.

What are these material records of the past? They range from portable personal possessions to entire landscapes. They encompass things that are human-made—a medieval ceramic container from Syria—and natural things modified by human behavior, such as a conifer cone from New Guinea bound with straw to retain its integrity. While there may be considerable overlap in the skills historians need to interpret such a wide range of things, each also requires a particular, appropriate mode of address. A taxidermy specimen of a mounted duck-billed platypus actually has much in common with an oil painting on canvas—both are crafted through the artifice of a skilled maker. But, in order to use them as sources, historians must take into account the differences between them, both ontological and in terms of human cognition and use. Even then, such things are scarcely self-sufficient individually. Humans have always dealt with such things in terms of the perceived relationships among them. These relationships often involve using language, whether oral or textual. Material things, then, do not exist entirely independently

1. What can be learned from a water bottle representing a woman with a young child of the Moche people of Peru, ca. 150–800? Pottery portraits in Moche culture appear to represent actual individuals and their social activities. Artworks like this portrait jug frequently depict the flow of water through human bodies, thereby embodying the Moche society’s dependence on irrigation. Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, Harvard University.
of texts, spoken or inscribed; but neither can such things be reduced to texts.

How do material things function in human use? Humans gather them, nurture them, walk across them, climb them, kill them, eat them, make them, wear them, tell stories about them, bury them, revere them, destroy them, claim descent from them, forbid them to one another, give them to one another, exchange them, and much more. By manipulating them, humans articulate their own relationships with
A tintype photograph of botanists Merritt Lyndon Fernald and George Golding Kennedy posing with their essential field gear for plant collecting in front of a painted backdrop of the outdoors, ca. 1890. Each man holds a trowel, a vasculum (a tin case for carrying fresh specimens), and a portable plant press. Gray Herbarium, Harvard University Herbaria.
6. This cross-section of submarine telegraph cable celebrated the laying of the first permanent telegraph line across the Atlantic Ocean by the British ship Great Eastern in 1866. The little trophy captured people’s excitement that new technologies had made the world smaller. A message that once had taken ten days to deliver by ship between Europe and America now took just minutes. Telegraph companies, however, reputedly made greater profits from selling souvenir sections of cable than from transmission fees. General Artemas Ward House Museum.

one another. Various human societies perform all these actions—and more—differently from each other, often in mutually incomprehensible ways. In order to perform all these actions in a repeatable manner, humans distinguish things from one another, name them, and group them. For the most part, however, things are radically unstable. They change physically over time, in their uses by successive human groups, and in their significance to various peoples. A telegraph cable designed to carry messages beneath the Atlantic Ocean can be cut into innumerable slices for souvenirs. To trace an original use or significance is to account for only one period in the life of a thing, a period not necessarily more important than others it might subsequently have had. To ascribe precedence to a maker’s intentions or to an object’s first use is to fall into a trap of oversimplification. This has happened to many people who have studied material things historically. We do not dismiss intention or first use—far from it—but propose that, even if intention and first use can be reliably established, they constitute just a part of the story.

Although we can sample some of what humans do and have done in relation to the things they choose, make, and use, this project as a whole—and this book in particular—clearly cannot hope to be comprehensive in its examination of these phenomena. Yet we can confidently offer a chart for future navigation and instances (case studies), each one of which may initially appear to be an island, but that in unexpected or even scarcely perceptible ways are all a piece of the continent, a part of the main.

_Tangible Things_ examines a core group of concerns in the study and use of material things: how Westerners have distinguished, named, sorted, grouped, gathered, and subsequently deployed material things in order
Great objects make great minds.

7. “Great objects make great minds” is among the quotations that Sarah Henshaw Ward Putnam penned on the pieced quilt, dated 1881, which she sewed for her spinster nieces in Shrewsbury, Massachusetts. Her source was “Night Thoughts” by the eighteenth-century English poet Edward Young. Widowed three months after her wedding, Putnam spent her remaining seventy years shuttling between relatives’ homes. The potholder, piecework style of this quilt suited her mobility, but the quotation is poignant as Putnam had few objects of her own. General Artemas Ward House Museum.

to make knowledge claims about both them and the emergent concepts their users have associated with them. These activities are the basis of much Western methodical thinking. Distinguished thinkers have considered them since classical antiquity. Although a great deal of ink has been expended on museums and other collections of things as constitutive of the social order, comparatively little consideration has been given to them as instruments of thought. Our project approaches that topic by exploring how museums aggregate particular selections of material things for the purpose of thinking.

In the nineteenth century, scholars in museums tended to regard the things in their collections as transparent, reliable indicators of reality independent of human cognition. Those who distinguished, gathered, sorted, and named all kinds of tangible things assumed that they were uncovering identities and relationships that existed regardless of what anyone might think about them. Their arrangement constituted actuality. They were, in short, object lessons. From the late nineteenth century and onward, scholars like William James questioned such assumptions and
8. A survey of established facts: Master basket maker Clara Darden wove this basket using river cane from the homelands of the Chitimacha people in southeastern Louisiana between 1900 and 1910. The complex double-weave basket is one basket woven inside another. The interior of the basket is woven from natural cane, and the exterior has the up, across, and down pattern woven in red, black, and undyed cane. The basket’s strength, water resistance, and glossy finish derive from silica in the river grass woven into it. Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, Harvard University.

9. When one thinks of Harvard’s august Houghton Library, one thinks of rare books and manuscripts, not works of modern art made of jumbled metal kitchen utensils. Resembling a junk drawer, the piece was described by the artist as a metaphor for a fast-paced, disorganized life. Shouldn’t this work be in a museum of contemporary art? Houghton Library’s curators did not think so. They added it to the library holdings because it was art realized in the form of a book. Artist’s book, Little Chaos, by Deborah Phillips Chodoff, 1996 (detail), Houghton Library.
introduced the idea that things and human minds are mutually dependent: Things do not function or even exist independently of the way humans think of them. This undercut the intellectual authority of collecting institutions, which formed their collections on the assumption that the ordering they employed conformed to an actuality beyond human contrivance. Additional developments in the twentieth century further undermined the authority of museums. Here the works of French philosophers Michel Foucault (1926–84) and Jean Baudrillard (1929–2007) (who, with their numerous followers and in different ways, examined the contingencies and artifice of human knowledge claims, subordinating all human activity to the conditions of language) are of particular importance. While it remains important to take such works into account, we resist the tendency to confine analysis of tangible things to considerations of language, and the reduction of the institutions that deal with them—museums—to instruments of social control alone. Museums led the way in the development of still-significant fields of inquiry before being superseded by emergent research universities that addressed pure intangibles unconstrained by the relative unwieldiness of material things. However, collections of tangible things—museums—remain not only as scholarly institutions in their own right, however compromised their claims to intellectual authority may be, but also as parts of larger scholarly institutions that are less directly engaged with the public, such as colleges and universities.

Our own work in universities drives us to ask: What place can university and college museums play in the ever-developing research and teaching endeavors of the institutions of which they form parts? Museums bring many challenges, among them the need for the continuing physical care of their collections and physical plants, the difficulty of access, the seeming irrelevance to many active areas of inquiry, and the expense. Most of all, their physical nature and often their scale—Harvard's Museum of Comparative Zoology alone holds an unfathomable twenty-one million things—render them unavoidably cumbersome. The individual collections at Harvard, like other collections elsewhere, continue to contain—and constrain—these various things in collections that sometimes appear to impede creative inquiry. This state of affairs arose because collections were formed in relation to particular disciplines and academic departments. In recent years, new areas of research and teaching have emerged that challenge traditional disciplinary boundaries. At Harvard and elsewhere, the structures of collections have not kept pace with these changes.
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10. Before the invention of typewriters and mechanical writing machines, inventors looked to musical instruments for keyboard designs. An example of blurred boundaries is this French state-of-the-art printing telegraph, ca. 1870–85. The operator did not need to know Morse code to send a text message, just how to play the piano. Collection of Historical Scientific Instruments.

The 2011 Tangible Things exhibition at Harvard was the most far-reaching intellectual and practical challenge yet attempted to the relative isolation of the university’s collections. It queried the very rational-ale that continues to structure Harvard’s—and many other—methodical collections. The future of academic research and teaching in many fields will depend on far greater permeability among collections than is the case at present. In our own teaching, for example, we needed to bring a Native American riding whip handle from Harvard’s General Artemas Ward House Museum into physical conjunction with bison ribs in the Museum of Comparative Zoology and with artifacts made by the nineteenth-century Indigenous inhabitants of Nebraska in the Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology. With such materials, we were able to explore the story of westward expansion of peoples of European origin across North America in the years following the Civil War in a fresh and precise way. If these things—and others both like and very different from them—remain isolated in their disciplinary collections, never
11. One way to overcome the problem of dated categories is to consider new uses for material things and redefinitions of their purposes. For instance, Lydia E. Pinkham’s patent medicine remained popular long after her death in 1883 because of clever advertising that appealed to the changing needs of American women. Here Mrs. Pinkham, in a dowdy black dress complete with a bustle and froth of white lace on her bosom, counsels a young office worker, with bobbed hair and finger waves of the 1920s, sitting at her typewriter. Arthur and Elizabeth Schlesinger Library on the History of Women in America.
crossing boundaries, our opportunities to conceive new ideas about the material world in all its richness and variety in a whole host of fields will be curtailed.

Although *Tangible Things* is a history project—the authors are, after all, historians—it is also a plea for and a demonstration of the need for far greater flexibility in the management and deployment of collections of all kinds on behalf of all disciplines that make use of such materials. New ways of sorting and describing these tangible things will facilitate their application to new areas of inquiry. Could new modes of grouping and gathering allow these things to be compatible with new and future requirements of universities and scholarship more generally? Can we overcome the inertia of collections, despite numerical growth, or are they doomed to be just so many expensive and increasingly irrelevant encumbrances? How did organized Western inquiry reach this seeming impasse in respect to tangible things?

Whatever other purposes they may serve, these things and their modes of organization are magnificent sources for historians—when they take the trouble to learn to work with them. Does this use alone justify their

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12. In late March 1965, the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. led thousands of civil rights demonstrators on a fifty-four-mile march from Selma, Alabama, to the state capital, Montgomery, to petition for the voting rights of black people. This photograph by Matt Herron—documenting what was hailed as the greatest demonstration in the history of the civil rights movement—is treated today not simply as a historical record but also as fine art. Harvard Art Museums/Fogg Museum.
13. Mundane objects can tell remarkable stories. The toes of these slippers sport the coat of arms of Radcliffe College in needlepoint. The extra-large shoes belonged to Wilbur Kitchener Jordan, the male president of the women’s college from 1943 to 1960. Radcliffe Archives.

retention and cultivation? Probably not. Yet historians, with their particular charge to translate the ever-changing past into the ever-emerging present, are especially well placed to argue for the potential of collections of tangible things in scholarly inquiry. Worthwhile future uses may not resemble past or even present uses. A photograph made to record a contemporary newsworthy event might be redeployed as a historical document recording the particularities of a significant past moment, or as an artwork in recognition of its aesthetic qualities. If collecting institutions are to become more useful as instruments of inquiry, they will have to be more flexible and less exclusionary in both the development of their collections and the uses to which they put them.

We developed the *Tangible Things* project in order to address these large-scale, consequential puzzles. We used Harvard’s collections as a convenient case study. These particular tangible things, and the collections into which they have been formed, were readily accessible to our students and to us, as well as to visitors interested in exploring our puzzles. Yet there is nothing deferential or celebratory in our choice of the Harvard collections as our focus. Just as much can be done with commonplace or “found” objects treated as traces of the past, wherever they may be. Nonetheless, our use of Harvard’s collections did lend our project an additional dimension. If, for much of its existence, Harvard was an obscure regional school for local gentry and clergy, it emerged in the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries as a place of scholarly competence, renown, and influence, both nationally and internationally. Its patterns of organization, however idiosyncratically formed in individual institutional instances, came to carry weight beyond
14. This homely travel toothbrush folds up into its metal case and is crafted from repurposed implements. It is witness to the growth of dental hygiene in the mid-nineteenth century that led many travelers to carry their own homemade toothbrushes. General Artemas Ward House Museum.

15. The Harvard undergraduate portrayed in these vintage wax candles wears “plus fours,” baggy breeches that were characteristic of Ivy League fashion in the 1930s, when the candles were made. Harvard University Archives.

Cambridge, Massachusetts, and in at least some cases, reflect and affect developments elsewhere.

Tangible Things therefore both reflects, and reflects upon, institutional collecting developments consolidated by the late nineteenth century at Harvard and in Western thought and practice more widely. In the Special Exhibition Gallery of the Collection of Historical Scientific Instruments, we placed a wide variety of things within each of the six fundamental categories into which tangible things have frequently been sorted since full-scale institutionalization in the nineteenth century. These correspond not only to Harvard’s division of collection labor, but—broadly speaking—to that of Western societies generally (though, obviously, there are some variations among them both regionally and nationally). Each of these six fundamental categories contains a vast diversity of materials within it, but those materials all exhibit characteristics that make their placement in each category appear plausible, or in many instances, even natural. The categories are anthropology and archaeology, art,
16. Engraved with a long and wordy tale and mounted as a trophy, this silver teapot no longer brews the hot beverage its owner, Samuel Johnson, so relished. The English lexicographer bequeathed the teapot to his Jamaican companion and valet, Francis Barber, in 1784, but it was pawned by Johnson’s executor and sold, as the inscription relates, “at the very Minute” when Dr. Johnson’s body was being autopsied in the next room. Houghton Library.

17. An ear of corn is as commonplace as can be, but close examination may reveal beauty in its beaded structure. This cob, harvested in Brazil in 1918, reminds us that corn has been cultivated for more than 6,000 years in the Americas, where it remains the preeminent grain crop. Economic Botany Herbarium of Oakes Ames, Harvard University Herbaria.

manuscripts, history, natural history, and science and medicine. The things we exhibited in these categories are what we describe in the next chapter as “Things in Place.”

In the same gallery, clearly marked to differentiate them from the cases containing the “Things in Place,” we arranged further cases containing arrays of things exhibited without discernible order. In these cases, we created a miscellany that we informally termed our “muddle.” We put a tiger skull near an ancient tortilla, an Australian Aborigine message stick, a Japanese sword and scabbard, an Indonesian accordion-bound manuscript, a Native American quirt (whip) handle, samples of fabric for
enslaved African Americans' clothing, and a contemporary artist's book made from kitchen implements.

These things—and others—seemed to have nothing to do with one another beyond the fact of their physicality. Their arrangement issued a friendly, quizzical challenge to the viewer—and to ourselves—that we made explicit by text panels urging visitors to "SORT THEM!" These are the objects we discuss as "Things Unplaced."

A third feature of the Tangible Things project involved exploring the galleries of seven Harvard collections after interlopers from one collection were inserted into the preexisting display of another collection. The seventeen "guest objects" were hidden in plain sight, revealing new aspects of themselves by virtue of being seen in unfamiliar surroundings. The guest objects also exposed and encouraged scrutiny of the basic

18. This French dagger, ca. 1840s, was exhibited under the category of art and interpreted as an art critic might: To hold this weapon is to take envy into one's hand, for the figure (on the handle) personifies this emotion. Harvard Art Museums/Fogg Museum.

20. An item in the “muddle”: A tiger cranium and jaw is a specimen of *Felis tigris tigris*, but a note inked on the skull—telling us that on the day after Christmas, 1849, this tiger was shot in the head in Hyderabad, India—makes it something more. Museum of Comparative Zoology.

21. How does one classify an unidentified text written on fan-folded sheets of palm leaves bound in wood? As a herbarium specimen of economic botany, an Indonesian ethnographic object, or a book illustrating the widespread use of accordion bindings from India to China and Southeast Asia? Houghton Library.

22. A tiger skull, a Japanese sword, a book made of palm leaves, an artist’s book of metal kitchen tools, a riding-whip handle, a hundred-year-old tortilla, and the tapeworm of a Boston Brahmin are some of the items clustered in this “muddled” case in the 2011 exhibition *Tangible Things* at the Collection of Historical Scientific Instruments, Harvard University.
23. Although this armillary ring sundial made in Lucca, Italy, in 1764 was displayed as a "thing out of place" to be sorted, it belonged to a rich traveler who could use it to find true north, his location, and the time at any latitude. Collection of Historical Scientific Instruments.

assumptions underlying each host display. We examine this aspect of the project in "Things out of Place."

"Things in Stories—Stories in Things" examines the way the undergraduate general education course *Tangible Things: Harvard's Collections in World History* employed objects to tell stories about Harvard's relation
to the wider world. We also look at some of the stories habitually told in Western society—especially in America—about these things and the people associated with them, and show how new stories emerge. These objects and their entangled stories offer proof that the study of particular things can lead to far-reaching historical discoveries by revealing patterns, relationships, and complexities that would otherwise remain hidden.

In the chapters that follow, we explore the structure of the *Tangible Things* exhibition in further detail, looking at the categories we identified, the "muddle" of things we chose and assembled, the interventions we contrived with guest objects at their various locations, and the stories told through and from things. We undertook this exhibition not to produce a tidy, finished product—as is usually the case with museum exhibitions—but rather to extend a process of investigation pursuable only by means of the assembly of the objects concerned. The exhibition was truly an experiment, the results of which we could not possibly foretell. Therefore, rather than produce an anticipatory catalog, the common museum practice, we chose to write about it—here—only after we had had the opportunity to take our observations of the many juxtapositions and interventions in the exhibition itself into account. We offer case studies of tangible things, each of which opens a portal to the past, but each of which also carries a promise for the future as we explore how the radical instability of tangible things transcends the collections that have sought to contain them. We seek to do all this confident that these things will present us, and our successors, with fresh opportunities to develop both historical understanding and innovation in a wide variety of fields.
Anthropology and Archaeology

A GLASS JAR: A SURFACE FIND IN THE SEMITIC MUSEUM

When the Ottoman Empire officially entered the Great War in August of 1914, a small, iridescent green-glass jar began its long journey from North Africa to the Semitic Museum at Harvard. Maximilian Lindsay Kellner acquired this jar along with other antiquities when he conducted excavations in Palestine and Syria in the summers of 1913 and 1914. After his death, Kellner's collection of more than one hundred glass and ceramic items eventually passed to Harvard. Kellner was a professor of Old Testament languages and interpretation at the Episcopal Theological School (now the Episcopal Divinity School) and a lecturer at Harvard. His intellectual work was closely tied to that of the Semitic Museum.

As an artifact of daily life in the Holy Land, the jar is at home in this museum. It offers archaeological evidence about craftsmanship, technology, the transmission of culture, and everyday experience. But it may offer more than that. The iridescent surfaces of glass items like this one inspired a range of new art objects around the turn of the twentieth century. The desire for things with a rich historical patina, a real or invented link to the

48. Excavated in 1914, this four-handled glass jar is archaeological evidence of daily life, technology, and culture in Syria and Palestine during the fourth and fifth centuries. Semitic Museum.
past, had deep literary, artistic, and historical resonance for Kellner, his wife, and their contemporaries.

At just over ten centimeters in height, the tiny jar was created during the fourth or fifth century CE in Syria or Palestine, then still in the eastern part of the Roman Empire. Its rounded, globular body sits on a concave base. Four curved handles connect the base to the rounded rim and echo the shape of the open, rounded roll near the opening. In the fourth century CE, the glassblowing industry in the eastern Roman Empire was thriving, perhaps because of the relative stability that the reigns of Diocletian and Constantine brought to the east.  

Scholars have documented the technological innovation and wide variety of glass forms found in Syria and Palestine during this period through studies of applied ornament, diverse mold forms, and a variety of shapes and functions. This small jar was likely free-blown and then transferred to a pontil or rod, as indicated by the scar at its base. Using the pontil, the rough lip could be reheated to form the rounded rim and the projecting roll near the top before the four handles were applied. Looking closely, it is clear that it could not have been used for drinking, as liquid would have been trapped in the open, decorative roll. It may have been used as a small storage jar or as tableware.  

The jar's  

49. The iridescent surfaces of glass jars like this one—which were chemically caused by centuries of burial—inspired nineteenth-century glass artists like Louis Comfort Tiffany to reproduce this accidental effect in their works. Semitic Museum.
most notable feature is its newest: an iridescent patina, variably opalescent greens, pinks, and yellows. Centuries of contact with the earth created this unintentional chemical reaction. Its corroded surface still retains some dirt.

The bits of dirt on the jar’s surface are the only direct evidence of its place of origin. According to the records of the Semitic Museum, it was found in a Greek or Roman tomb. However, there is no information about how Kellner acquired the collection of Roman glass from which this jar is drawn. In an article he published after his 1913 excavations, the biblical scholar proudly narrated his discovery of scores of flints. He noted even the theatrical detail of the names of the three horses, Abdullah, Abu Shaker, and Hamar, that carried heavy saddlebags weighed down with his Neolithic finds. In June 1914, Charles Peabody, curator of European archaeology at the Peabody Museum at Harvard, joined Kellner’s expedition. They focused on gathering items related to Neolithic and Paleolithic Palestine and Syria. Peabody published his notes from his six-week camping trip with Kellner and made no mention of the glass.

Kellner does not seem to have published anything about his acquisition of the sixty pieces of pottery and forty works of glass that he collected on the same trip. Instead, another frustrated scholar wrote of the shaky provenance of some of the ceramic items Kellner procured in 1913, describing questionable dealers and noting of some objects, “nothing is known as to their provenance beyond the vague and valueless rumor that it was the Jordan valley.” And later, “as usual, nothing definite could be learned as to the locality from which they came.” Most of Kellner’s early research employed Assyrian texts, artifacts, and monuments to study the Old Testament to learn more about the connections among Israel-Judah, the Hebrews and other peoples. His work with flints was similar. He believed that the artifacts of prehistoric people could shed light on some aspects of the Old Testament. The small glass jar appears to be millennia too late for his main research interests.

In addition to his scholarly credentials, in his mid-forties, Kellner married into Anglican aristocracy when he wed the widow of prominent Rev. Phillips Brooks’s brother, Elisabeth Willard Brooks. Mrs. Kellner seemed to be as fascinated with the Mediterranean’s ancient past as her new husband was. She accompanied her husband on his 1914 summer collecting trip and was there when he, “at great inconvenience,” managed to bring artifacts back to the United States while the war in Europe raged. She also seems to have had her own collection of antiquities and a deep interest in the meanings of the past. In her novel As the World Goes By (1905), the power of Rome’s antiquity directly transforms her main character into a submissive protestant saint. While this romantic view of the past appears
to be at odds with the archaeologically rooted Biblical history promoted by much of her husband’s work, it fit squarely within the anti-modernism that dominated American intellectual life at the turn of the twentieth century.

Artists, writers, and reformers viewed the past, both distant and near, as direct intellectual and spiritual inspiration. Cultural historian Jackson Lears identified the late-nineteenth to early-twentieth century as an “antimodern” moment in American history, when the culture of the past seemed to offer vital lessons.86 Antimodernism was not just about the ancient past, but encompassed visions of the early American past as well. Colonial revival projects like the transformation of the Artemas Ward House into a “Public Patriotic Museum” offered a specific vision of early American history as white, protestant, and rural. Such a vision aligned with nativist sympathies and offered a static, limited definition of “American” in the face of an influx of immigration. Artists and designers fed this movement through the development of objects that echoed, replicated, and transformed ideas about the past to fit present aesthetic and consumer needs—whether through the creation of faux Americana or the development of fine art objects inspired by Arthurian legends or the ancient world. The discovery and display of Roman glass, such as this jar, contributed to this trend.

In the last decade of the nineteenth century, Louis Comfort Tiffany began producing fine glassware. Among the techniques that would make Tiffany’s Favrile glass famous, “Cyproite” glass was created in imitation of corroded ancient glass from Cyprus. It was inspired by objects in the collections of the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Glassmakers would roll a blown object in a layer of crushed glass and then apply an iridescent glaze, creating a variegated, colored surface that mimicked the oxidation caused by centuries of burial. Like this small glass jar, the surfaces of Tiffany’s Cyproite glass glinted with a range and depth of colors. Other forms inspired by the ancient world—by Rome, Egypt, and Samos—joined Cyproite glass in the Tiffany stockroom. The glazes and techniques Tiffany pioneered took inspiration from ancient forms and created new artworks through technological innovation.87 The new forms added a sense of history to the highly ornamented surfaces of Tiffany interiors.

Photographs of what may be Max Kellner’s own study reflect this style.88 They suggest the personal appeal that objects of the late Roman period may have held for him and his wife, more so than the scores of carefully studied flints he collected to trace the history behind the Old Testament. A vase of peacock feathers, small, decorative glass and ceramic vases, and religious art all rest atop his bookcase. Heavy drapes, a fringed desk lamp, and a wall tiled with photographs complete the scene
50. Likely the study of Maximilian Kellner, an Old Testament scholar and collector of Roman glass, this interior shows an appreciation for art objects that echoed the past but were transformed by contemporary aesthetics. Harvard University Archives.

and suggest an aesthetic sensibility. Cypriote glass would have been as at home in this interior as the antiquities he collected.

Apart from the items on his study shelves, there is only one clue that suggests Kellner had a personal interest in glass, a pamphlet tipped inside his scrap album in the Harvard University Archives. The pamphlet is a visitor's guide to the Glass Flower exhibition at the Harvard Natural History Museum. Leopold and Rudolf Blaschka, father and son craftsmen in Dresden, Germany, created the glass flowers between 1887 and 1936 as teaching aids. The life-sized models combined technical virtuosity with artistic skill and scientific precision. Though the lamp work required to craft the delicate flowers may seem to be a world away from the fire-rounded rim of the four-handled jar, it is not. The Blaschkas, just like the fourth-century CE Syrian or Palestinian glass-maker who created this jar, and even Louis Comfort Tiffany's designers, transformed an ancient art through precise skill and a sophisticated awareness of the properties of glass.

In the Tangible Things exhibition, we placed an elegant floriform Tiffany glass vase from the collections of the Fogg Art Museum beside the Blaschkas' more scientific creations. Together in the Natural History Museum, they forced visitors to query the connections between art and
science, artifice and nature. Perhaps Kellner would have understood this juxtaposition even more deeply. Consideration of his Roman glass collection, now in the Semitic Museum, raises additional questions about the distinctions between past and present, tradition and innovation, and inspiration and imitation. Housed in a museum devoted to archaeology and anthropology, artifacts like Kellner's glass jar may provide nearly as much evidence about the complex culture of collecting in the early twentieth century as they do about daily life in the ancient world.

S. A. C.

Books and Manuscripts

A PAPYRUS FRAGMENT: PLATO FROM THE SHARP-NOSED TRASH

Pressed lovingly between glass plates, the frayed papyrus barely contains eighteen incomplete lines of the third book of Plato's Republic. The Greek letters appear to tumble and push their way off all the ragged edges. The papyrus is fragile, but the ink is strong and dark. It challenges our belief that the manuscript is nearly 1,800 years old.

Plato wrote the Republic between 386–367 BCE, but the oldest, complete Greek manuscript extant is a Byzantine copy from the ninth century

protruded from the leafless thickets; and again have beheld the vitreous inland rocks worn down and grooved into deep ruts by ages and ages of the slow dragging of tortoises in quest of pools of scanty water....

Nay, such is the vividness of my memory, or the magic of my fancy, that...often in scenes of social merriment, and especially at revels held by candle-light in old-fashioned mansions, so that shadows are thrown into the further recesses of an angular and spacious room, making them put on a look of haunted undergrowth of lonely woods, I have drawn the attention of my comrades by my fixed gaze and sudden change of air, as I have seemed to see, slowly emerging from those imagined solitudes, and heavily crawling along the floor, the ghost of a gigantic tortoise, with "Memento ****" burning in live letters upon his back.\textsuperscript{93}

So what is this tortoise marked "SHIP ABIGAIL / 1835 B J Clark / MASTER" to us? The most fundamental of scientific specimens, an antique food remnant from the world of whaling ships, a message written large on an Ecuadorian reptile, or an enchanted muse for our time?

S. J. S.

\textbf{A Carved Spoon: Pointing a Finger}

This wooden spoon has a pointing and purposeful finial: a small, naturalistic hand deftly carved into its tip.\textsuperscript{94} Three curved fingers are held in check by the bent thumb as the index finger points in the opposite direction from the spoon's bowl. It makes a decisive gesture, similar to the letter "D" in American Sign Language. The hand is concave and appears taut. The figure in the wood creates a lined, realistic surface for the palm. It appears to be a hand according to Western conventions of representation. It does not simply suggest a hand but copies one, with realistic joints and creases. The carved hand is attached to an elongated wrist that morphs into a curved handle and links to the ovoid bowl of the spoon. The skilled carver used the grain of the wood to emphasize the hand's connection to a lean forearm. The carved wrist is resolved into the handle through a simple incision. Its color, a rich reddish brown, could be that of flesh. The spoon is about twelve inches long, and the entire carved hand could fit inside of the large semicircular spoon bowl at the opposite end.
This object does not easily fall within any of George Browne Goode's six categories. In *Tangible Things*, it is an unplaced object.

Formally, the carving seems equally divided between function and representation: a serviceable spoon bowl on one end and a carved, pointing appendage at the other. These two aspects make it easy to consider it as an anthropological and art-historical object, one with a clear cultural context and function, as well as an aesthetic. It could as easily be housed in the Fogg Art Museum as it is in the Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology. A Western user, thinking of its potential culinary use, would hold this spoon at the slight crook in the handle, where the human form becomes a utensil. The wooden index finger would point above and behind the user, in the opposite direction from the spoon's bowl.

The precise anthropological context of the spoon is unclear. It was collected in sub-Saharan West Africa in the mid-nineteenth century. Its tribal affiliation and maker remain unknown, and it does not seem to have a clear iconographic link to an existing cultural group. The naturalistic carved hand may have more in common with Western art than with African forms of representation and could suggest a hybrid style. It may be a variation on the ceremonial spoon form, perhaps reflecting a combination of colonial Portuguese and West African traditions. Though it appears to be scaled for domestic use, the carefully carved hand may have had a spiritual function. Ceremonial spoons are objects that convey title, respect, and power in a range of African communities. Such spoons were part of the accretions of office for high-status women, and were

75. Collected in sub-Saharan West Africa in 1857, this wooden spoon has a handle that morphs into a carving of a human hand with a pointing finger. It is hard to categorize, appearing more ceremonial than functional. Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, Harvard University.
used in ceremonies or in displays outside of homes rather than for cooking. The object may be related to a specific individual or title, giving it a social identity. This potential anthropological context was not carried with this object to the United States, where it was cataloged simply as a “spoon.” It remained a curio in private hands until it was donated to Harvard three decades after it was collected.

In *Tangible Things*, the spoon is an unplaced object precisely because it is equally uncomfortable as art and anthropology. As history, the spoon points to an even deeper discomfort, as a trace of the transatlantic slave trade.

The spoon was acquired on the southwest coast of Luanda, the present-day capital of the nation of Angola, in 1857. Mary Willis Sparhawk donated the spoon along with more than sixty other objects to Harvard’s Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology in 1883. Her son, Clement Willis Sparhawk, was a medical student at Harvard at the time and graduated the following year. The objects she donated were from both Africa (the Congo) and South America (Brazil). Her husband, John Bertram Sparhawk, had collected them on his travels. He had been a Massachusetts merchant and traveler, with substantial interests in the Brazilian rubber industry, and had owned a plantation on Fernando Pó, now Bioko, an island off the coast of Cameroon that is part of Equatorial Guinea. He was not just a trader and a merchant but also a farmer, who required substantial labor to produce rubber, coffee, rice, and cocoa for U.S. markets. In the 1850s, Sparhawk had sailed on ships owned by his wealthy uncle and namesake John Bertram, making trips across the Atlantic to Angola and Pará, Brazil. Objects like this spoon and the other artifacts recorded in the logs of the Peabody Museum document his travels.
The pointing hand on this spoon was not the only human form crossing the Atlantic in the 1850s. U.S. participation in the African slave trade had been illegal since 1807. In the 1850s, when Sparhawk was traveling, U.S. nationals were certainly not supposed to be involved in the Brazilian slave trade, though some southern slaveholders and northern merchants ignored this prohibition. Ships flying the U.S. flag illicitly carried slaves from West Africa to Brazil in the years before the American Civil War. Sparhawk’s connections to both Brazil and Angola suggest that he may have had a deeper connection to this trade.97 Even without direct involvement in the sale of individuals into slavery, some of the people who worked for Sparhawk in Pará, Brazil, where slavery was legal into the 1880s, were likely enslaved, as were the workers who supported his endeavors in Angola.98 In 1864, Sparhawk and his son Bertram (born to his first wife in Brazil) applied for a joint passport, and by the following year, they were running a nearly 1,500-acre plantation in Fernando Pó in this case, one they had committed to operating with free labor.99 The venture went horribly wrong and the two Sparhawks were basically marooned until their family sent funds to rescue them. The elder Sparhawk died one month after he returned to Massachusetts in 1872.100

A decade after his death, his wife donated his collections to Harvard, whose accession log described the lot as “[a]n interesting collection of weapons, feather garments, gourd dishes, and other native work of the Amazon Indians; and of the grass-cloth garments, basketwork, carvings on wood and ivory, trumpets made of elephant tusks, and numerous other objects of native workmanship from Southern Africa.”101 The large donation linked Brazil and Africa in the Peabody Museum’s records. The places recorded in the museum’s ledger book followed the same path as the enslaved Africans forcibly moved to the Amazon to work the rubber and coffee plantations, which were often funded by American capital and designed to serve the needs of U.S. consumers. Did Mary Willis Sparhawk realize the larger story her donation recorded? In the years her husband and stepson were in Fernando Pó, her father Clement Willis served as an alderman in Boston and proposed the creation of a monument to those who died “putting down the Southern Rebellion.” The Army and Navy Monument was installed on the Boston Common in 1877. Today Mary Willis Sparhawk’s museum donation may suggest as much about Massachusetts’s role in slavery as does her father’s towering plinth.102

This carved spoon with its pointing finger may have shared a vessel with enslaved Africans, and later with the goods being sent to Massachusetts that
their hands helped to create. As an unplaced thing, does it suggest a specific ceremonial function? Could a careful anthropologist link it to the identity of a respected female tribal leader? Perhaps an art historian could explain how a talented artist imbued a carved stick with as much energy as God’s crooked finger on the Sistine Chapel ceiling. Or does it serve as a placeholder for a shameful, often forgotten chapter in American history? Maybe it is all of these things and a material metaphor: a piece of a human body employed for another’s purpose, taken from one context to another, and after more than a century in a museum case, still pointing to a sinister history.

S. A. C.

**A Mexican Tortilla: From Exotic to Ordinary**

Even though it belongs to a botanical collection, this object was not taken from the ground or clipped from a stem or shrub. Nor did it grow, fungus-like, on the trunk of a rotting tree. It is a cultural artifact, a product of human hands. It is ostensibly a tortilla, but for some reason, the label-maker used the plural form of the word and enclosed it in quotes. Was this a mistake? Or did the string threaded through the hole in

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77. Small, thick, round, and charred, this hundred-year-old tortilla is a botanical specimen collected in Mexico in 1897. Economic Botany Herbarium of Oakes Ames, Harvard University Herbaria.
the upper corner once held more than one specimen? The handwritten label says the tortilla was “Made from Zea Mays.” That's corn or maize. But nearly everything else on the label raises questions. No one at the Harvard University Herbaria, where the tortilla now lives, recognizes the handwriting or the numbering system on the label. Although the name “J. N. Rose” and the date “1897” seem to fit, Joseph Nelson Rose was a botanist with the National Herbarium in Washington, an affiliate of the U.S. Department of Agriculture. His 1899 treatise on Mexican plants includes a brief mention of tortillas, but there is no record at Harvard explaining how or when this specimen came here. The reference to “O. A. Col” adds to the puzzle. Although Oakes Ames became an instructor at Harvard in 1900, the Oakes Ames Collection of Economic Botany was not established there until 1918.

This is an errant tortilla in both senses of the word, a wanderer and a deviant that defies attempts to fix its provenance. A closer look at the tortilla itself raises still other questions. Until time and evaporation curled its corners, it appears to have been an almost perfect circle, no doubt a result of wet dough being rolled into a ball between the palms of two hands, then flattened and slapped onto a griddle, perhaps a too-hot griddle. That it was exposed to fire seems apparent from the black streaks—scorch marks—on its surface. Even more intriguing is the thin crack stretching from the punched-out hole where the label is attached. The crack suggests that the hole was made after the tortilla had begun to dry. A fresh tortilla is amazingly pliable. It would have been easy to poke a hole in it when fresh, more difficult after it became brittle. The wonder is that it did not break apart. Maybe its unusual thickness helped to give it stability.
In Spanish, the word tortilla means “little cake.” This tortilla appears to be both smaller and thicker than the tortilla pictured in Rose’s 1899 article. It is also quite different from the tortillas that found their way to the Oakes Ames Collection from an even earlier collector. In 1878, Edward Palmer, a pioneer in the emerging field of ethnobotany, sent both tortillas and implements for making them to Harvard’s Peabody Museum. In the 1970s, the Peabody transferred his tortillas to the Harvard University Herbaria but kept the implements he collected and a more modern photograph that may once have been displayed with them, dividing what was once a unified collection between two modern disciplines. Palmer’s tortillas, still in the big glass jar in which they were once displayed, are remarkably thin and without visible scorch marks. Although curled, they seem mostly intact, but then no one attempted to poke a hole in them. The labels on the jar, though typed, conform to the numbers in Palmer’s manuscript account of his expedition.\footnote{79. You can't have just one: a jar of tortillas collected by ethnobotanist Edward Palmer in San Luis, Potosí, Mexico, 1878. Harvard University Herbaria.}  

\footnote{80. A woman preparing tortillas in Mexico, date unknown. The photograph was displayed in the twentieth century alongside artifacts collected by Edward Palmer in 1878. Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, Harvard University.}
Today, the presence of tortillas in the collections of a major university seems bizarre. In the nineteenth century, however, these humble things appeared exotic. Palmer and Rose both wrote about their travels in Mexico and offered observations about the making and use of tortillas. Comparing their descriptions alongside the specimens they left allows us to see the context in which the things they sent to Harvard were created. They also expose the range of attitudes that these two articulate white men brought to their observations of women’s work in a culture that was not their own.

Palmer pioneered the field of ethnobotany, a discipline that eventually brought together plant science and ethnography. Although his major work was collecting pressed botanical specimens for the Smithsonian and other eastern U.S. museums, he was intensely interested in the way the various communities he visited used native plants. Although he organized his materials according to taxonomic classifications, his interest in the interconnections between plants and humans established a new way of collecting and documenting specimens. In 1871, he wrote a now-classic paper, *Food Products of the North American Indians.*

Palmer was interested in all the tools and processes involved in harvesting *Zea mays* and in turning shelled corn into bread. He emphasized that in Mexico, Indians and “mixed race” peoples did not grind their grain dry as in the United States, but boiled it over low heat and then ground it into a paste while wet using a *metate* or grinding stone made from volcanic rock. Usually the grinder was also the baker. She arranged her pot of corn and her *metate* near a round earthen grill (comal) set on rocks over a small fire. Palmer was fascinated by the fluid movements of the tortilla maker as she knelt on the ground in front of her *metate* transforming wet corn into dough, gradually filling a container with the wet mass. He used words like “strength and dispatch” to describe her labor.

When she was ready to form a tortilla, she took a fistful of dough from the trough, flattened it “out with the palms of her hands a little.” Then “with great quickness” threw it from one hand to another, whirling and catching it, “keeping the hands close together so it can be quickly caught in case the edge needs thinning.” Then, grabbing another clump of dough with her left hand, she slapped the finished disc onto the comal with her right. “It is astonishing how quick they are made and cooked,” he wrote, adding that “[m]akers of tortillas' tell their whereabouts by the loud, peculiar noise resulting from the cake being thrown from the palm of one hand to another in order to render the cakes thin.”
Tortillas were not the only things made with the maza ground on the metate. Palmer also described the making of paches, tamales, and gordos. The only difference between a gordo and a tortilla, he explained was "in the extreme thinness of the latter." Unlike the tortilla, the gordo was sometimes cooked in the ashes like the corn "dodgers" or cakes he had known in the United States as corn meal cake. His description raises the possibility that the tortilla displayed in Tangible Things may in fact have been a gordo. Certainly it is more visibly marked by fire.309

In contrast to Palmer, Rose treated tortilla-making in a perfunctory way, briefly describing the grinding and baking but paying scant attention to either tools or art. The difference may have been in the two men or in the women they observed. Surely there were both regional and personal differences in cooking methods, regardless of culture. Rose claimed to have "traveled 600 miles on horseback," observing that more than once he came to "a Mexican’s hut after a long day’s ride, tired and hungry, and found I had to wait until the woman of the house had made her little fire on the ground, mashed her corn on her ‘metate,’ parted it into little cakes, and baked them." He recalled that tortillas were usually served hot from the griddle and "passed about in a gourd or clay dish, covered with a rag or cloth," though sometimes they were warmed "by throwing them on a bed of live coals." When cold beans or cheese were folded into them, they were called gordo, meaning ‘fat one.’110 Although Palmer and Rose had different definitions of a gordo, Rose’s description of a woman "patting" rather than "throwing" the dough suggests that there was more than one way to make a tortilla and that his tortilla might have had a lot in common with Palmer’s gordo.

Although Palmer and Rose were both interested in the ways human beings interacted with plants, their orientations were different. Palmer’s instincts led toward ethnobotany, which is why he is remembered today as a forerunner of the field of ethnobotany. Rose’s interests may have been more closely aligned with what came to be called economic botany. In that regard, he had much in common with Oakes Ames, the man who gave his name to the collection in which both Palmer’s and Rose’s tortillas are now found. When Ames became director of Harvard’s Botanical Garden in 1909, he developed an undergraduate course that he taught for many years called “Outlines of Economic Botany.” The course was not taught in Harvard Yard, but on the grounds of the Botanical Garden. To support the course, Ames added to a collection created by his predecessor,
George Lincoln Goodale. Although there is as yet no documentation for this, the tortilla may have originated in Goodale’s collection.

There is better documentation for the nature of Ames’s course. According to a former student, Edgar Anderson, he paid little attention to agricultural staples like wheat, rice, or corn and said nothing at all about lumber, instead turning to exotic materials like amber. He supposedly spent an entire month on arrow poisons. In response, waggish students dubbed the course “Uneconomic Botany.” Even those smitten by Ames’s interests did not know what to make of them. Anderson recalled, “When I finished the course I thought it the most fascinating one I had ever taken but… also the most useless.” Only later did he understand that Ames “was one of the few people in this country to take a really intelligent interest in cultivated plants.” Anderson later became a renowned plant geneticist.111

The Harvard University Herbaria has notes in Ames’s tiny handwriting that he may have used in preparing lectures. He did devote a page or two to Zea mays, though the information he collected was somewhat random. He noted that in Holland, maize was called Turkey wheat, that in Italy, “corn food” was called polenta, and that in Mexico, it was used to make tortillas. Although most of his references date from after 1912, he read and quoted from Rose’s 1899 report. He displayed an interest in the nutritional, as well as the commercial, dimensions of his topic, adding a reference from a 1916 Scientific American article on the problem of pellagra in corn-based foods. Given today’s concern over the use of high fructose corn syrup, his reference to the development of “a substitute for maple syrup” is intriguing.112 But there is nothing in these papers to suggest more than a passing interest in corn, and nothing that identifies the moment when somebody associated a tortilla with the “O. A. Col.”

After a century in the Harvard Herbaria, the tortilla that now lives in an attic has lost its significance as a botanic specimen and its luster as an ethnographic object. In the larger culture, the once exotic tortilla has lost its italics and become just another item on a grocery list. To understand how that happened and why it matters requires knowing something about the ancient transformation of Zea mays into a nutritional staple, the rituals and folkways that gave it meaning, and the market forces that metamorphosed a labor-intensive breadstuff into American fast food.113

In 1899, a prominent Mexican senator insisted that the world could be divided into three races—the people of corn, the people of wheat, and the people of rice. The people of wheat were, in his view, the only truly
progressive race. Maize, he said, was “the eternal pacifier of America’s indigenous races and the foundation of their refusal to become civilized.” He and others campaigned to replace hand-ground maza with centrally milled flour and tortillas with wheat bread. They based their arguments on the images of poor peasant women bending over their metates hour after hour. Not until the 1940s did nutritional studies begin to push back, demonstrating that the ancient combination of maize, beans, and chilies offered adequate nutrition, and that the old practice of adding lime to the water in which the corn was boiled released important nutrients.

Today, despite the availability of mass-produced tortillas, some Mexican-American women insist on using a metate to prepare masa and chilies for special occasions. Ethnic pride and history come together in their choices. As Edward Palmer understood, there is artistry in the backbreaking labor of making tortillas. Liduvina Vélez, who now lives in California, learned to make tortillas in Michoacán, Mexico, where she was born. Married at sixteen, she felt inferior to her husband’s mother and sisters until she realized that she was better than they were at making tortillas. “And when I saw they made some ugly tortillas, I no longer was embarrassed… Üy, my tortillas would come out so thin, puffed up so nicely!… I mean, yes, yes; I would beat them at making tortillas.”

Harvard’s 116-year-old tortilla began a new journey in 2011 when it emerged from the attic of the Herbaria to remind Harvard students and visitors to Tangible Things that common objects also have histories.

L. T. U.

A Beetle Ornament: Iridescent Opulence

A string of five beetle carapaces separated by glass beads not only catches the eye because of its brilliant green iridescence, but also prompts a host of hard-to-answer questions. Although this item is in the Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, it is a small and modest thing of the kind that might turn up in a family attic or curio store. The original museum ledger entry records it among a number of things described as coming from the “Naga Hill District, Burma, India,” more specifically Diliku, as a “Beetle necklace.” Roland Burrago Dixon acquired it with many other artifacts during a Peabody Museum expedition in 1912–13.

Dixon had completed his doctoral dissertation at Harvard in 1900, and he remained there, becoming an assistant professor of anthropology
While waiting for the reply, Winthrop began to put together the instruments for the expedition. His own health was too frail for the journey and he was ambivalent about one of his students leading the trip in his stead. Therefore, he was stingy in what he would lend from the college, offering only the old, second-rate apparatus. On the other hand, he wanted to give the student a good chance of success and so was audacious in attempting to borrow first-rate items from loyalists and customs officers like Joseph Harrison, who had been among those beat up and burned out of their homes by Boston’s mob. Let the fine apparatus of these gentlemen go on the trek, Winthrop apparently thought, but let us not risk Harvard’s brand new treasures in the canoes or on the pack animals.

In spite of political differences, General Gage responded politely and offered much advice, letters to post commanders, and wilderness guides—but no money. The governor applauded the research trip but claimed himself unauthorized to finance it. In the end, Winthrop consoled himself with observations of the transit in Cambridge, using all the new apparatus secured by Franklin since the fire. Made by Short, Dollond, Ellicott, Sisson, and Bird, these instruments were as fine as any to be had overseas and comparable to those that outfitted the European transit expeditions. Financed by colonists and expressing their scientific aspirations, these instruments had made it through the rough political waters that were surging between London and Boston.

The instruments that survive today are more than brass and glass, wood and lead. Imported at great expense from a metropolis to a province, they helped to determine the dimensions of the solar system in 1761 and 1769 in the midst of armed conflict and the affirmation that politics should give way to the cause of science.

S. J. S.

_Changing Stories about American Indians_

One of the fundamental founding stories of the American nation vindicates the displacement of the original inhabitants by newcomers who began arriving to settle as recently as the seventeenth century. Some Americans still accept the notion of Manifest Destiny by which, in the words of the journalist John O’Sullivan who coined the term in 1845, they have “overspread the continent allotted by Providence for the free
development of our yearly multiplying millions. Yet many people have questioned or challenged this story, provoking controversy. Some newcomers who were sympathetic to Native Americans long assuaged their guilt with the notion that Indians were fated to disappear, either through attrition or absorption within colonial society. This is the story of the “vanishing Indian.” Native Americans and some others expend great efforts to refute it. Demonstrating that Indians are not disappearing means telling other stories. How does this happen?

Two sources of new stories are Indian gambling casinos and museums. The success of the Foxwoods Resort Casino of the Mashantucket Pequot Tribal Nation in Connecticut, which opened in 1992, is a prominent example of Indian casinos engendering economic and political influence. Among the most conspicuous projects financed by the casino is the Mashantucket Pequot Museum and Research Center, reportedly the largest tribal museum in the United States. Museums are a conspicuous way of asserting indigenous cultural continuity, for unlike many anthropological museums within the socially dominant sector of American society, Native American museums give considerable weight to contemporary conditions. This is true of the National Museum of the American Indian (NMAI), which opened in Washington, DC, in 2004. A predominantly Native staff worked with Indigenous community curators to create the long-term exhibits, transgressing museological conventions but telling stories of Indian life, past and present, from an Indian point of view unfamiliar to many in American society. Such changes have in turn helped to promote a paradigm shift in stories told by those who dominate American society about the Indigenous peoples’ past and present. Harvard has played a role in promoting this shift through two institutions in particular: the Peabody Museum and the Harvard University Native American Program (HUNAP).

HUNAP emerged in 1990 from a program begun in 1970 at the Graduate School of Education to train American Indian educational leaders. It expanded to become a university-wide endeavor, and in 1998, the central administration designated HUNAP an interfaculty initiative of Harvard University to focus on scholarship and teaching throughout the university (with a focus on Indigenous nation-building), Native outreach, and student recruitment and support.

Since 2005, the Peabody Museum has collaborated with HUNAP and the department of anthropology to lead an undergraduate teaching excavation. The site is the Harvard Indian College in Harvard Yard, built in
1655 for the Christian education of Indians. The undertaking ended in 1670, and the building was demolished in 1693. The excavation opening and closing ceremonies took place with local Native participation, reminding all present of the Indigenous moral claim to precedence of identification with the site. Since 2008, the results have been displayed in an exhibition at the Peabody Museum organized with student participation: *Digging Veritas: Archaeology and History of the Indian College and Student Life at Colonial Harvard*. The Harvard Yard Archaeology Project is a conspicuous part of the renegotiation by Harvard of its relationship with Indigenous Americans. It is part of a newly emerging story in which things in Harvard collections— principally in the Peabody Museum—play a vital role.

Although the excavation did not uncover any specifically Native American items, in 2007, student archaeologists found several pieces of metal printing type used in the production of John Eliot’s 1663 translation of the Bible into the Massachusetts variant of the Eastern Algonquian language. The Eliot Bible is of particular importance in Native life as a vital source of information about eastern Massachusetts language forms that are currently being used in the Wôpanâak Language Reclamation Project. Wôpanâak is the language of the Wampanoag peoples of southeastern New England that until recently was dormant. The revival of the spoken, as well as written, language since 1993, as a result of the work of Wampanoag tribal member Jesse Little Doe Baird, represents a further change in the story of Native Americans, exemplifying a determination not to acquiesce in the submergence of Indigenous cultural identity in that of the dominant society.

Harvard has shown itself to be especially keen to foster good relations with the various Massachusetts Wampanoag bands. Before 2011, Caleb Cheeshahsteamuck, A.B., 1665, had been the last Wampanoag to graduate from Harvard College. He died of tuberculosis within a year. His Native classmate Joel Iacoomb disdained that same year in a shipwreck before he could receive his degree. In a symbolic act, once again seeking to change the story of colonizer–Indigenous relations, Harvard conferred a degree on Iacoomb posthumously in a ceremony in May 2011.

No tangible things are associated directly with Iacoombs, but a small woven textile bag transferred to the Peabody Museum by the American Antiquarian Society in 1890 has traditionally been called Caleb Cheeshahsteamuck’s bag on the basis of a nineteenth-century label. However, the bag conforms to a type of tubular woven raffia bag from
Côte d'Ivoire and Liberia described by two Peabody Museum scholars in 1992. Might trade between West Africa and New England have brought it to the East Coast of America before Cheeshathaumuck's death in 1665? The student who researched the bag in the 2002 seminar, Claire Eager, concluded that "the likelihood that the bag ever came into contact with Caleb in life is slim," but points out that "his story remains integral to its history because of his influence on its rediscovery and research" since HUNAP has used Cheeshathaumuck as a symbol in its nation-building outreach and teaching. Here is an African thing that has become part of an American Indian story, occupying an ambiguous role in the collections of the Peabody Museum, for it was illustrated on the museum's website in 2009 as a "Bag belonging to Caleb Cheeshathaumuck, Aquinnah Wampanoag, Harvard's first Native American graduate, Class of 1665." As Eager pointed out, "a 'false' story would be just as important to the whole history of the bag as the true ones.... Caleb belongs to the bag now, even if it never belonged to him."

Even as Indians themselves are presenting their own stories, non-Indian scholars are increasingly welcoming and exhibiting Indian points of view. An example at the Peabody Museum was the long-term exhibit (2009–12) *Wiyophiyata: Lakota Images of the Contested West*. Peabody curator Castle McLaughlin and Lakota artist Butch Thunder Hawk highlighted a ledger book in Houghton Library filled with drawings by Plains Indians that was found at the site of George Armstrong Custer's defeat in 1876. Their exhibition presented Lakota perspectives on colonial westward expansion. The Chicago newspaper reporter James W. Howard (whose pen name was Phocion) acquired the ledger book soon after the battle. He ascribed the drawings to a single artist whom he fancifully named Half Moon. However, recent examination by McLaughlin and Thunder Hawk suggested that at least five artists were responsible.

Howard's invention of Half Moon, like the identification of the West African bag with Caleb Cheeshathaumuck, exemplifies the deep-rooted Euro-American ideological propensity to associate tangible things, no less than decisions and accomplishments, with individuals rather than with collectivities. Yet few nineteenth-century or earlier Indian artifacts can confidently be associated with identifiable individuals. One Indian item in the Peabody Museum, also exemplifying the Plains Indian drawing tradition, that can confidently be associated with an identifiable person is a pottery plate painted by a Cheyenne warrior named Nock-ko-ist, or Bear's Heart.
Nock-ko-ist was one of seventy-two Plains Indians captured and transported to Fort Marion in St. Augustine, Florida, after the Red River War in Indian Territory in 1874 and 1875. They were imprisoned between 1875 and 1878, but fell under the idealistic regimen of U.S. Army Captain Richard Henry Pratt. Pratt famously sought to “kill the Indian and save the man” by westernizing his prisoners’ appearance, teaching them English, converting them to Christianity, and teaching them a trade. His strategy attracted the attention and support of contemporary idealists, including the author of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1852), Harriet Beecher Stowe, who published a two-part article on Fort Marion in 1877. Nock-ko-ist, though, hung onto the skills he had brought with him into captivity, filling a book with twenty-four drawings recounting
his experiences following his capture. He used the conventions derived from Plains Indians' pictorial records long practiced on rocks, robes, tipi covers, and tipi linings, as adapted by many Indian artists in colonists' ledger books. Pratt presented Nock-ko-ist's drawing book to William Tecumseh Sherman, commanding general of the U.S. Army and an amateur painter. Nock-ko-ist drew on the same repertory of images for his plate as he had used in his ledger drawings: Similar representations of two mounted figures on the plate, each chasing a buffalo, can be found in a drawing in the book.

In 1878, seventeen of the Fort Marion prisoners were sent to the Hampton Normal and Agricultural Institute in Virginia, originally founded to educate formerly enslaved African Americans. At Hampton, Nock-ko-ist adapted his drawing style to the decoration of painted ceramics for a Euro-American market. This included the incorporation of Nock-ko-ist's anglicized name painted around the rim of the plate as a signifier of Indian authenticity and compliance. A New England philanthropist, the founder of various vocational schools and a financial supporter of the Hampton Institute, Mary Porter Tileston Hemenway, may well have acquired the plate, for her heirs gave it to the Peabody Museum in 1930. Nock-ko-ist took the name James Bear's Heart and left Hampton in 1881 for the Cheyenne and Arapaho reservation in Indian Territory, where he worked as a carpenter. He died of tuberculosis in January 1882. Pratt and his supporters may have been well intentioned, but as white voices give way to those of Indians, a story of laudable humane treatment has been superseded by one of cultural genocide.

As a hybrid object that represents attempts at rapprochement with American Indians on the colonizers' terms, the Peabody Museum has no qualms about exhibiting the plate decorated by Nock-ko-ist. Yet he also appears in another item in the Peabody's collections: one of sixty-four plaster busts modeled by the sculptor Clark Mills in 1877 after life masks of the Plains Indians held at Fort Marion. Although they are vividly lifelike, derived from impressions in plaster of the faces of individuals and then painted with a brown wash to resemble flesh, these busts were not conceived as portraits by their instigator, the Smithsonian Institution, which was collecting likenesses of ethnic types worldwide for anthropological study. Therefore, although the names of the sitters were recorded, the busts of the Fort Marion Indians were labeled solely with their tribal affiliations. The Peabody Museum received a duplicate set of busts from the Smithsonian.
Because they were directly derived from their subjects, these busts carry a charge of immediacy that makes them difficult to curate in current circumstances. Many anthropologists now try to respect Indigenous peoples and their values, regarding them in terms of the emergent story about Indians as representatives of social groups that have been wronged over generations. The institutional imperative to comply with the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act of 1990 (NAGPRA) has in some cases strengthened this story. Under NAGPRA, federally recognized Native entities can request repatriation from institutions in receipt of federal funds of human remains and artifacts in various categories, such as grave goods and items used in religious observance. The Peabody had instituted repatriation prior to the passage of the act and embraced it as an opportunity to strengthen long-term ties with Indigenous communities.\textsuperscript{89} Although the Fort Marion busts do not fall under NAGPRA, heightened curatorial sensibilities have affected their treatment. Descendants have ceremonially visited their ancestors' busts; in deference to their sensibilities, the busts are not considered appropriate for exhibition. Now, reserved primarily for Indian use, they serve Indian stories.

The uses of these various Indian things in Harvard collections—Caleb Cheeshahreamuck's bag, Nock-ko-ist's plate and bust, and many others—reflect changes in the stories told of them. Even if unreflecting white supremacism and a belief in Manifest Destiny still taint hegemonic received opinion, the stories told of—and by—Indians in institutions of learning have changed. Viewing at least aspects of the past and present while "facing east from Indian country," in historian Daniel Richter's phrase, through the prism of tangible things is no longer as difficult as it once was for Native and newcomer alike.\textsuperscript{90}

I. G.