

## DEPARTMENT: THINK PIECE

# Why Historians Should Pay More Attention to the Social Histories of Objects and What They Can Learn From These

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People have a long-term personal attachment to objects they use in their personal and work lives. They attach their identity to these because objects give meaning to their personal achievements. They are a form of credentialing, small monuments memorializing one's inclusion in an institution and acceptance of its values, behaviors, and purposes. Wear a lapel pin and you signal your identity and conformance to a community. In politics, pins also signal who is excluded, such as Jews in Germany in the 1930s not wearing Nazi Party pins, MAGA hats by Americans in the 2010s identifying who they are not associated with. Three-dimensional ephemera speak to values and tribalism, and their attendant allegiances. These signal one's permission to someone to guide his or her values and activities.

Historians have made insufficient progress linking the personal relevance of objects to the broader institutional histories they write about. Yet enterprises, government agencies, organizations, clubs, and other institutions consist of people. Objects and people together comprise components of a broader ecosystem of a company, an industry, or economy. Linking objects, people and institutions enrich an historian's understanding of people, organizations, and their history. I am a business historian who worked for a corporation for decades. What follows is an advocacy for the greater study of objects, relying largely on my experience in studying the history of IBM, the longest surviving computer company of the 20th century.

### WHAT ARE WE DEALING WITH?

Walk into the home of a veteran and there is probably hanging on his or her wall their collection of medals,

ribbons, patches, and certificates. Go to a baseball game and you might see a veteran wearing a cap saying Veteran. Go to a professor's home and you might see her Ph.D. diploma on the wall, certainly credentialing certificates on a medical doctor's office wall. A retired IBM employee probably drinks from an IBM-logoed coffee mug and has a drawer full of certificates and lapel pins documenting their milestone events. Anecdotal evidence from their comments in retiree Facebook groups suggests that almost all the 150,000+ retired employees probably display this kind of behavior.

It is also personal behavior. I prize my father's watch, which he wore for decades. I have his father's vest watch that he used from World War I all his life. Neither one is a museum piece, but they belonged to my father and grandfather, respectively. Called "family heirlooms," such objects vary from jewelry to furniture, photographs to bedspreads, and tools to kitchen utensils. The point is that objects are sentimental, also evidence of human activity, just as are documents, only in three-dimensional forms.

### WHY?

So what? Mere sentimentality? People are attached to objects. Organizations have long understood the power of personal ephemera that endow objects with meaning. Think three-dimensional archival materials. Museums understand this notion; although they have to be so selective that one's personal memorabilia rarely are displayed. The military and almost every company you have ever run into produced logoed clothing (e.g., uniforms and company caps), pens, day-to-day objects (e.g., company logoed staplers and pencils), souvenir publications and plaques. The list is endless. Why?

The traditional explanation is that all are advertising materials. Few would challenge that interpretation. Such objects are handed out at conferences and business shows; even the American military in order to attract recruits. They help the unretired too. When I wear

my father's Swiss mechanical watch in Switzerland, it is always noticed both for what it is: a classic, already over a half-century old. Before I even speak, I have earned respect, followed by compliments about the watch and questions about how I came to own such a prize.

### WHAT CAN BE STUDIED?

Many topics lend themselves to examination through the study of objects and odd paper ephemera. Perhaps the most important to both management and employees concerns the image and reputation of their employer. Extending beyond advertising, press releases, and speeches by management, behaviors, and their supporting ephemera are usually in evidence. For example, photographs and in the early 20th century postcards and pamphlets were vehicles for exuding images of strong financially successful modern enterprises. Postcards and miniature models of state capital buildings did the same to promote local pride. With IBM and other high-tech firms, all were in play; their archival records suggest purposefully introduced or encouraged by management. In IBM's case, the century-long use of its tagline, THINK, appeared chiseled into a building at a plant in Endicott, New York, on posters, advertisements, coffee mugs, pens, pins, plates, pads of paper, clocks, tools, covers of manuals, and websites. THINK was originally introduced to encourage employees to think about their company along the lines of its senior management's perspectives, but also to acknowledge the need for cerebral efforts to apply the company's complex products to improve its customers' operations. It worked—it still works.

The loyalty and willingness of an employee to give their all to an organization can be tested in part with opinion surveys, but also through rituals and events, especially those repeated as part of what it means for individuals and their families to be employed by an organization. If, for example, annual Christmas parties are held for children or elegant dinners for employees and their spouses, a paper trail exists of photographs and invitations to these events, programs, and printed menus, all documenting events important in their lives while illustrating who showed up at these, and how they were remembered decades later in memoirs and in Facebook. I found in these, for example, few African Americans in the U.S. IBM company until the late 1970s, then increasingly in subsequent decades. Privately owned photographs of employees at company events provided such evidence, too, not available in formal personnel files. Visitors to world fairs came home with postcards, souvenir statues, commemorative plates, and programs produced by their employers. Such ephemera survived for decades and appeared for sale on eBay.

Coffee mugs documented in which divisions and military units one served. As one corporate employee told me, "When you give a customer an IBM mug or when we use one ourselves, everyone is reminded of what we think about the company everyday." What customer with an IBM coffee mug used everyday saw any advertisement or publication produced by the firm so frequently? Here is an evidence of IBM-customer relations to explore not evident in more traditional marketing records.

Bonding with an establishment is not trivial. The more complex a product, service, or activity becomes, the more essential it is to retain highly skilled and trained employees for the longest possible time. So, an organization exercises possible means to foster loyalty, a sense of identity with the employer. It is more than providing good management, working conditions, salaries, or benefits. Loyalty involves emotional commitments to stay with the organization. Institutional presentations about the rates of worker satisfaction drawn from opinion surveys are useful, but insufficient, documentation. Add nostalgic remembrances of Christmas cards from the Chairman's office saved for years, or 25 year anniversary albums of congratulatory letters and monogrammed watches, and one begins to see more fully how bonds of time are forged and maintained. In short, objects can enhance an historian's understanding of how an organization and its employees interacted. That is why the additional sources to more traditional paper archival records are worthy of an historian's attention.

### WHAT SHOULD HISTORIANS DO?

Pay more attention to these materials. Understand where they were kept or used; then ask why? If the owner is alive, ask what meaning these have for them. Do not assume answers; ask to be sure. Broaden the query to understand what these signal about one's work, self-identity and of an organization. I keep a Cross pen with an IBM logo that I used with customers to sign contracts worth a million dollars or more—my "lucky" pen—that each time I see it reminds me of successful outcomes. That all my colleagues and many of our customers used the same brand of pen, instead of an inexpensive one, reminds us that we were running with an elite pack of professionals, that our companies were special in the thick of doing important work for business, even for humanity. Historians have to track down those signals of meaning. Archival records usually do not capture enough of those insights, let alone explain the significance of a pen or logoed coffee mug.

Historians can use their access to libraries, museums, and their basements to store and preserve such ephemera. There are already collectors, notably retired employees who have such collections. Identify them, use their objects, and persuade them to donate these to a library, museum, or historical society. Some are massive: one has over 2500 lapel pins from IBM, another over a hundred logoed American coffee mugs, yet a third hundreds of 18th and 19th century German clocks. It can be a long list. Scholars in such disciplines as cultural anthropology, paleontology, biology, sociology, media studies, and even linguists, to mention a few, study objects and have methods with which to do that useful to historians. Learn from them.

Is this discussion all too obvious, possibly trivial, and not professional since as graduate students they were not taught to carry out these recommendations? Here is the problem using the world of computers. Mostly everyone uses computing. Computing went from zero diffusion 90 years ago to being ubiquitous and society's shaping technology of the past half century. Thousands of vendors provided the hardware, software, and services comprising computing, while it seems most universities dabbled with or led in the development of underlying technologies, while hundreds of thousands of firms, later billions of people use it. But it happened so fast that museums and archives have not caught up with the objects, let alone identified their significance. IBM, for instance, the longest existing information technology firm has a magnificent paper and video-based archive, and copies of most of its products. That is all.

Yet, as I am learning in writing a history about IBM's culture, I need to consult postcards, coffee mugs, computer parts, lapel pins, even paper ephemera not collected by academically trained archivists. These include medical records, union organizing flyers, decks of "IBM" playing cards, expense receipts, tickets to company-sponsored concerts, photos in family albums of company Christmas parties, old identification cards, which tell us much about police identity verification practices as they serve as proof of one's identity to cash a check, individual collections of calling cards documenting the progression of one's career or documenting title inflation over time, and so forth. In fact, about 95% of my sources are not available in archives, better found on eBay or in pleadings for help on retiree Facebook sites.

What do such objects teach us? IBM's experience suggests possibilities, as it was as much a typical multinational company as any other—a key finding of my earlier research about the firm. By paying attention to the objects that I had to collect outside of archives and

bookstores, I was able to reconstruct histories of IBM's massive publishing program that made it possible for it to dominate the perspectives of the tabulating world for a half century and subsequently how entire industries and academic disciplines viewed computing from the 1940s through the 1970s, with lingering important influences to the end of the century. Union organizing at IBM in the United States has been a black hole, its absence in the written record and archival collections obvious. I was able to write a lengthy chapter on the topic based on flyers in several basements of union activists combined with interviews.

An important story to tell involved creating loyalty among the employees and to do that the company needed to do the same with the employees' families as well. It did that from the 1910s through the 1990s. It proved crucial to the development of a highly trained productive workforce. That initiative involved more than touting family values or IBM's beliefs, so understanding what I came to learn was a multifaceted strategy management honed over decades that had to be investigated. All of that evidence existed in employees' homes: plaques, silver baby spoons sent to generations of new parents, jewelry to spouses, Christmas presents remembered by their children decades later, descriptions of medical and retirement programs, others to deal with cognitively challenged children, photograph albums memorializing recognition events held in attractive locations, art work and commemorative plates celebrating other events, monogrammed Rolex watches, and those ubiquitous mugs that every employee seemed to have at least one of in their kitchens. These objects commemorated milestone events in the life of an "IBM family" or made explicit the economic benefits of employment.

An aspiration of a multinational corporation is to develop an effective culture that it can diffuse to all its locations around the world. IBM's customers and employees marveled at how the company was able to do that; no proof required. But what if you are a 30-year-old historian who never worked in business, just in academia as student then scholar? You require proof of that reality. First, you require proof that it existed, before you even can grapple with its features and how it was manifested and deployed. One example of objects at work demonstrates the possible.

At IBM for decades, on the occasion of someone reaching their 25th anniversary working at the firm, the custom was to have that person's manager host a celebratory luncheon and to put together a "Quarter Century Club" album of congratulatory letters from colleagues and the Chairman of IBM. These were cherished souvenirs; they never end up in archives, let

alone IBM's. But if you see one, say dated 1985 of an American employee, but then another dated 1957 from Columbia in exactly the same kind of 3-ring binder, also with letters from the Chairman, local management and local colleagues, and yet another from Japan from the 1990s, you have the evidence of at least one ritual considered important in the firm practiced around the world. What else, therefore, was in evidence in the United States, Columbia, and Japan? Now you have a research question crucial for understanding the value and form of a corporate culture considered ubiquitous and important.

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*COMPUTING REPRESENTS ONE OF THOSE BROAD, IMPORTANT, GENERAL AREAS OF HISTORICAL RESEARCH THAT WOULD BENEFIT FROM STUDYING THREE-DIMENSIONAL EPHEMERA, AND NOT JUST THE COMPUTERS AND HARDWARE THEMSELVES.*

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Quarter Century Club employees shared common characteristics: deep knowledge of the company and how it worked, of its products and practices, obviously competently implemented, extensive understanding of how their industry and technologies evolved, and so forth. Those binders—and accompanying lapel pins and certificates—can trigger many questions about the culture, as it did for me as I thought through how to prove that the company's culture was ubiquitous and shared attributes. In this instance we see the duration of employment, loyalty and pride of service to the company, family collaboration and support, especially since the binder would have been presented to the employee at the celebratory luncheon attended by spouses and often by their children. Baby spoons popped up all over the world and today on Facebook retiree websites. They continue to be mentioned as symbols of a culture long gone—a humble little silver spoon in Europe, Latin America, and in the United States. It is the stuff of books and articles historians can write about.

Historians of computing have much work to do. While this has started, particularly for computing of the 1940s–1950s, minicomputers and PCs await their historians of technology focusing on the evolution of these devices. Collectors exist, but they are not historians, they are not versed in how to study the evolution of technologies. Economic and business historians rely on paper ephemera for their research. But

engineers, computer repair personnel, and “geeks” have objects and tools that historians have never seen. Pictures of these often appear on Facebook with questions, such as “Does anyone know what this is?” There are always responses about their function, importance to the history of something's development always expressed in nostalgic language. One Facebook group of 14,000 IBM retirees continuously posts these kinds of messages.

In the 1980s, when researching the origins of the computer industry, I needed to understand why one adding machine or calculator was different (better?) than another. Their manuals and press articles were not clear, misinformed, or nonsensical. I had to touch the object. The Smithsonian Institution and one secondhand typewriter sales shops solved my problem, allowing me to learn how to operate and so understand one machine versus another. It is how I learned, for example, that Burroughs adding machines of the 1920s–1930s were like Dell PCs in the 1990s, how and why Felt & Tarrant products were like today's Apple machines. I could then rationally explain for whom and why one was more or less attractive. To write those pages, I had to have a Burroughs and a Felt & Tarrant on my desk to consult as if documents. Archival photos of rooms filled with such devices were insufficient sources of information.

## SUMMARY

Studying objects is still an underappreciated scholarly activity, especially for recent times. Computing represents one of those broad, important, general areas of historical research that would benefit from studying three-dimensional ephemera, and not just the computers and hardware themselves. But it is not the only one; these exist all over American society. This observation is even more imperative since the research on computing is shifting quickly to the social, cultural, and economic consequences of computing. Historians will want to study Facebook, Google, and Apple. Paper records will not be enough, even if they exist in our anti-paper pro-digital data records era. Already one can see on eBay Facebook ephemera, those coffee cups and T-shirts worn at company events as part of its corporate culture, while we mourn the fire in 2017 that consumed a large collection of traditional corporate records of Hewlett–Packard. Ephemera of all types exist. Now add our imagination and willingness to mine the mundane for evidence.

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