

“Tangible Things.” Harvard University Science Center/Special Exhibition Gallery of the Collection of Historical Scientific Instruments and other Harvard museums and libraries, Cambridge, Mass. http://www.fas.harvard.edu/~hsdept/chsi-tangible_things.html.

Temporary exhibition, Jan. 24–May 29, 2011. Ivan Gaskell and Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, curators; Sara Schechner, co-curator; Sarah Anne Carter, coordinator.

For much of Harvard University’s long history, its students found their place at the pinnacle of American society supported by the categorizations and linear progressions shown in the university’s museums. Artifacts of “primitive” cultures in ethnology exhibitions, canonical masterpieces in art galleries, and neat classifications in natural history collections all depicted a world that culminated in the glories of Western civilization, leaving Harvard students with no need to wonder where they belonged in this evolutionary sequence. Scholarship has thoroughly problematized and deconstructed those progressions and categories in recent decades, challenging museums of all kinds to rethink the provenance and meanings of their objects and techniques of display. Of the strategies for doing so, perhaps the trickiest is to foreground museological and intellectual categories themselves, an approach that runs the risk of alienating or confusing viewers who are comfortably ensconced within the structures of thought that are being deconstructed and put on display. A temporary exhibit at Harvard this spring took up the challenge of exploring this abstract realm of metanarrative and found ways to link it with the livelier and more experiential tactics being embraced by museums and similar sites.

“Tangible Things” was a multifaceted, multiveneue project that emerged from a history research seminar on material culture cotaught by Ivan Gaskell and Laurel Thatcher Ulrich since 2002. Drawing on the literally millions of objects in Harvard’s nearly fifty museum and library collections, the seminar asked students to do close readings of chosen artifacts and to research the objects’ provenance, substance, and changing meanings. The resulting body of student work, particularly from a 2010 graduate version of the seminar, provided the underpinnings for expanding the project into a full-fledged exhibition and an associated undergraduate class, “Tangible Things: Harvard Collections in World History,” cotaught by Gaskell and Ulrich in spring 2011. Part of a new General Education Program designed to foster interdisciplinary breadth and engagement with the world outside the university, the class used the history of Harvard’s collections and museums as a framework for deconstructing disciplinary and conceptual classifications and for showing how those intellectual constructions have historically upheld particular kinds of relationships and enterprises. The exhibit, which included more than two hundred objects from fourteen Harvard collections, played with categories by moving objects out of their established settings and into new spaces. The resulting juxtapositions and disjunctions exposed the constructedness of our systems of understanding objects and encouraged students and visitors to participate in creatively questioning, historicizing, and perhaps reclassifying what they were seeing.

The core exhibit, funded by academic and arts-related sources from within the university, was located in the 1,200-square-foot special exhibitions gallery at the Harvard Science Center. Along the walls, selected objects were grouped into traditional categories associated with specific types of museums: art, history, natural history, anthropology and archaeology, books and manuscripts, science and medicine. In the center were a number of cases called “Muddle,” where objects were displayed with no helpful categorizations, challenging viewers to decide where a tiger skull or a *Blondie Goes to Leisureland* board game (ca. 1940)



This die-cut “Votes for Women” sign (ca. 1915) in the shape of a bluebird was a “guest object” from the “Tangible Things” exhibition placed in a case of bluebird specimens in the Harvard Museum of Natural History. *Photo by Cathy Stanton. Courtesy Cathy Stanton.*

might belong. Exhibit labels of somewhat uneven quality, reflecting the shared authorship of the faculty curators and their students, provided basic information about the objects, while cell phone audio segments offered descriptive and historiographical depth.

In addition to the central gallery exhibit, the curatorial team planted a number of “guest objects” in six other Harvard museums and libraries. These quiet outliers were identifiable by a special “Tangible Things” label but otherwise were subtly integrated into existing displays. A Passamaquoddy woman’s silver hat band from the Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology joined a glass case of liturgical and other gold and silver objects in the Arthur M. Sackler Museum’s gallery of American art; John Singer Sargent’s palette came out of the Fogg Art Museum and went into a case of instruments for measuring the color spectrum at the Collection of Historical Scientific Instruments; a sign from a 1915 campaign for women’s voting rights, die-cut in the shape of a bluebird, was moved from the Schlesinger Library on the History of Women in America to a Museum of Natural History display of specimens of actual bluebirds. As with the main exhibit area, the idea behind the “guest objects” was that encounters with the out-of-place artifacts would prompt viewers to reflect on processes of selection and categorization that go into assembling any museum display.

To gain a sense of who seemed to be encountering the exhibit and how they were experiencing its conceptual challenge, I visited the main exhibit twice, examined guest book comments, conducted a half-day treasure hunt in search of the guest objects, and attended a classroom lecture by Gaskell and Ulrich and a follow-up meeting with their teaching fellows for the course. It seemed clear that although all of the gallery spaces were open to wider publics, the great majority of visitors to the core “Tangible Things” gallery were people already within Harvard’s ambit, primarily graduate and undergraduate students associated with the past and present courses, prospective students and their families on campus tours, and perhaps people from other museums and libraries on campus. Indeed, the curatorial team acknowledged that an important goal of the project was to foster more intellectual and professional exchange among staff in museums and libraries at this

complex and famously decentralized university, and that while breaching institutional barriers had been time consuming, new connections had been created (one staff member from the Harvard Art Museums wrote in the guest book, “It’s great to see some of the things we have I didn’t even know about!”).

Whether the objects outside the core gallery exhibit were having the desired effect was more difficult to gauge. I did not observe anyone at the venues I visited pausing to look more closely at the guest artifacts, and among the participating museums, only the Sackler Museum’s front desk staff and docents were aware of the project, suggesting that communication, in most cases, had not filtered down from the curatorial level. The Sackler, one of Harvard’s three art museums, also revealed how deeply entrenched the established conventions of classification often still are, despite several decades of critical questioning from within the academy. While much of the Sackler’s wall text self-consciously challenges the older categories, its galleries still reflect them in sometimes troubling ways, with Native American objects and Asian religious artifacts, weapons, tools, and ornaments displayed unproblematically as art objects. The Museum of Natural History, in contrast, has clearly embraced the museological reflexivity that “Tangible Things” was advocating. For example, a special exhibit on horned creatures included cases devoted to human uses of animal horns, while an excellent short video in the Great Mammal Hall historicized the institution’s roots in nineteenth-century modes of sorting and display, providing a context for the museum’s decision to restore rather than change the Great Hall during a 2009 renovation. These kinds of offerings presented “nature” and “culture” as twinned (and equally problematic) concepts and foregrounded some of the personalities, processes, and fortunes that have contributed to endowing Harvard’s schools and the collections. “Tangible Things,” then, was pushing the conversation in some areas of the university’s museum network and following behind it in others.

The exhibit’s most active constituency, though, seems to have been students in Gaskell and Ulrich’s class. Anticipating an enrollment of sixty, the two scholars were caught off guard by the 250 who signed up. Faculty and teaching fellows ascribed this unexpected surge largely to undergraduates’ expectation that an object-based course would mean a light reading load, but I have to wonder whether it was also linked with the current popularity of “treasure-hunting” and “scavenger-hunt” approaches to museums and artifacts in television, film, tourism, and many museums’ own public presentations. Students and museum curators alike were apparently pleased by the opportunity for more Harvard undergraduates to discover the university’s galleries. There was also exchange, and even informal mentoring, between undergrads and the graduate students who had researched the objects for previous years’ seminars. I observed a conversation between a grad student giving a gallery talk and an undergrad who wanted to make poetry using some of the texts in the exhibit; the older student provided a crash course in navigating some of the university’s archival spaces, and the poet showed quite a sophisticated sense of the complexity of doing primary-source research.

Not every student apparently reached this level of sophistication, and the teaching fellows also reported that some in the class seemed to be taking away the message that they could simply throw out disciplinary distinctions rather than critically interrogating them. This raises an important point about the exhibition, which represents the best in current museological scholarship yet remained contained largely within a still-exclusive institution. If, as “Tangible Things” illustrates so clearly, Enlightenment-project taxonomies

reinforced Harvard students' and professors' sense of themselves as being the end products of a long "civilizing" process, what subtle messages might the more playful and genre-busting approach of this exhibit have conveyed to the students and Harvard staff and visitors who viewed it? The socioeconomic hierarchies and distinctions supported by old categorizations have by no means vanished simply because scholars are more able and willing to deconstruct them—in fact, American economic inequality has been growing exponentially in the same period that this deconstructionist shift has been taking place within the academy. Instead of seeing themselves at the top of a pyramid or the end of a linear progression, the students who participated in "Tangible Things" likely came away with a sense of a diffuse world of hybridized border cultures and global flows of capital, people, objects, and ideas. But they still occupy an extremely privileged position within that world, and the exhibit may have served largely to initiate them more fully into their future roles as cultural consumers and power brokers even as it exposed the roots of Harvard's collections and the structures that house them.

Scholarly critiques of those structures have to compete with the fun of surfing through collections and categories in a more unmethodical and recreational way. And indeed those high-status surfing skills—and the cultural capital that accrues from being able to navigate the cascades of information that we are presented with daily—may be the key lessons that Gaskell and Ulrich's students took away from the exhibition. Whether sitting at the pinnacle of civilization or riding the waves of the information society, the audiences at elite universities and museums are still on top, a fact that these institutions must continually grapple with if they seek to change the workings of power rather than merely reveal or reproduce it.

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