

## The Meaning of Things by Carol Dickson

Does Sterling's Brown Library really need a copy of *Costume Language: A Dictionary of Dress Terms* from 1994 in its reference section? What should the Hardwick Historical Society do with an antique horse-drawn pump wagon? Should the Vermont History Center keep a rock that someone thought was a petrified potato? Students in *The Meaning of Things* experiential endeavor course have been asking questions like this as we consider how we give meaning to human-made and natural material objects. It may seem counterintuitive, but a significant component of understanding objects is the question of what we discard (or "deaccession," as museums and libraries put it). More selective collections can be more meaningful, and what we keep, of course, says a lot about who we are, individually, institutionally, and culturally.



Experiential Endeavors are signature integrative courses in Sterling's new curricular model. For three afternoons each week all semester, students pursue a combination of classroom learning, applied learning in the field, and work projects (as part of the Work Program). The Meaning of Things is a humanities-focused Endeavor that takes a closer look at the ever-changing relationships between humans and material objects or "storytelling through windows of tangible objects," as student Ollie Quinn puts it. In the words of archaeologists Chris Gosden and Yvonne Marshall, "as people and objects gather time, movement and change, they are constantly transformed, and these transformations of person and object are tied up with each other."

To explore how these ideas play out, we have visited local museums including the Museum of Everyday Life, the Fairbanks Museum, and the Vermont History Museum and learned about the curation, interpretation, and—yes—deaccessioning of objects. We have also participated in work projects with the Sterling library and archives, the Sterling natural history collection, the Hardwick Historical Society, and the Craftsbury Historical Society. Exploring materials in the archives helped us think about the relationship between Sterling's history and objects that are saved and donated. Updating Sterling's natural history collection inventory raised questions for us about the ethics of preserving and displaying natural objects. Helping to sort historical society materials challenged us to consider whose stories are being told and whose are left out of our histories. Throughout the course, students reflect on their learning through discussion, readings, and writing in response to our experiences. Here are a few of their highlights, focusing on a favorite object, a memorable experience, and a takeaway from the course so far.

### Ollie Quinn (Sterling 2025)

*The Meaning of Things has been a great learning experience for me in changing how I view objects. I thought about the life of objects after*



visiting *The Museum of Everyday Life*, which focuses on the extraordinary stories attached to otherwise mundane objects. The museum is split into different sections such as lists and notes, scissors and keys. My favorite section EE is the dust exhibit. There is a fan blade on display which is covered in dust. The person who donated the blade to the museum let the dust collect rather than cleaning it. Dust is a part of all areas of our life; it gathers in the corners of our rooms, on the top of your favorite book you haven't had the time to read or next to the herbs on our pantry shelf. It is funny that it is all around us but the only time we think of it is when we want to get rid of it. I think this is why the items in the dust exhibit will always be my favorite. It is a keeper of time, a dancer in the light which seeps in through our windows, a silent observer of our lives.



able to hold someone else's story in your hands. I held a doll from someone's collection and family photos. This experience for me highlighted how we give objects meaning and they also provide meaning to us; history is an interweaving of people, places and objects. One of these categories can not exist without the other.

Questions that have arisen for me thus far have to do with the changes of technology and its impact on museum experiences and archives. How has technology already impacted our museum experience or access to archives? How will this impact change over time and is it necessarily good or bad? What are the main differences between looking at a digital object versus seeing it in person and where can we find similarities?

### **Yun Me Me Zaw (Sterling 2025)**

*Favorite object? Have you ever experienced that tingly excitement when you come across an object you used to love as a child in a totally unexpected setting? The first day of the Meaning of Things, Carol Dickson, our professor, brought a cluster of random objects to class and among them was a single wooden top, a traditional Dayak toy, purchased from Malaysia as a souvenir. It caught my eyes right away. As my fingertips ran through the tiny cracks on the outer rim of the top, I could still feel the competitive spirits of the neighborhood kids for the sport called 'gasing'. It not only brings people together but also has such important cultural significance whether to celebrate a harvest or as a courting ritual.*



An interesting experience that has stuck with me from this class was getting to look at the archives at the Vermont Historical Society. The Vermont Historical Society has a museum which tells a curated story of the history of Vermont. However, in the archives the stories of Vermont that emerge from objects are open to interpretation. While the archive items are in a certain order, there is a non-linear element to their story which I believe is an important way to look at history. It was fascinating to see the shelves open up at the turn of a crank and be



*helps not only to enhance the meaning of other objects by refining the collection but also to use the available space and resources on objects that serve the target audience.*

### **Audrey Jacobs (Sterling 2024)**

*Favorite object? The Niddy-Noddy is a nifty tool that was used more commonly a couple hundred years ago. Now, unless you are deep in the spinning or knitting community, you might not know what this object is. Essentially, it is a wooden, twisted capital "I" used for making skeins. As a spinner of yarn myself, I have used this tool before and have grown quite fond of it. The simplicity, practicality, and silly name bring me so much joy and make my skeins look so tidy.*

*Most interesting experience? Visiting the Museum of Everyday Life was one of the most enjoyable museum trips I have been on. Being there felt like a carefully curated balance between exhibit and old attic. The familiarity of the objects themselves, the clutter and ruggedness of the building create an environment that is welcoming and feeds the childhood curiosity of what it was like to explore the attics or basements of our grandparents. To dig through their belongings in search of treasure or stories. The displays describe the lives of everyday, working class people. It is who we are and what we use. Maybe the "we" doesn't describe everyone, but I bet more people can relate to the exhibits in this museum than they can at a museum of fine arts.*

*Takeaways from class so far? The biggest takeaway I've had from this class, from everything to the readings and discussions, work days in the library or archives, to the field trips is that it's easier to be a hoarder than a minimalist.*

Turning our sights to semester's end, students will put into practice the concepts that we have been studying through designing, curating, and interpreting their own individual exhibits, as well as collectively developing a display of objects from the Sterling archives. In doing so, we invite you to share in our journey and to ask yourself: What significance do the objects in your life hold for you? We will certainly keep thinking about these questions!

*Most interesting experience? If there is one thing I take away from the class, it would be the importance of cataloging. We worked on Sterling's natural history collection which included tasks such as making sure the items in our collections were all on the catalog, identifying a box full of cluttered bones and labeling the specimens that are on display. We sent out a picture of the mount of a screech owl that was in very poor condition; its head was deflated with the ear tufts missing. Little did we know, we unknowingly started an online controversy through Sterling's very long email chain. Some said it's a northern saw-whet while others said it's a poorly maintained screech owl. When it got to Sterling's Instagram page, it got some critics riled up. It was one of those memorable experiences which we can look back and laugh at yet we learned a lot about the importance of cataloging.*

*Takeaways from class so far? I struggle a great deal with getting rid of things which leads me to being, what Carol calls, a hoarder. However, one of my biggest takeaways from class is how essential deaccessioning is in curating a collection as it*