

Manuscripts and Manufacts

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Smithsonian Institution

THE Smithsonian Institution was founded, in the famous words of James Smithson, for "the increase and diffusion of knowledge among men." Its role has developed with the changing character and interests of its Secretaries, who have interpreted Smithson's mandate in terms of laboratory, library, and museum functions. The first Secretary, Joseph Henry, conceived of the Smithsonian primarily as an experimental laboratory, and he frequently thought that its museum and library functions interfered with this primary concern. In 1866, in Henry's administration, the Smithsonian's great library, including significant manuscript collections, was deposited in the then modest Library of Congress. After Henry's death in 1878, Spencer Fullerton Baird, a leader in the field of natural history, became Secretary. Under Baird's administration the Smithsonian's museum activities flourished and the first Smithsonian building to be used solely for museum purposes was built. The collections of objects in the Institution were the raw materials—usually the byproducts—of the research of the scholars who constituted the Smithsonian's staff. Indeed, two freight-car loads of specimens collected by Baird while at Dickinson College came to the Smithsonian at the time of his first appointment to a post at the Institution in 1850.¹ In the words of William J. Rhees, the Smithsonian's object was not "to collect specimens promiscuously, or those usually found in other museums. Hence the collection of this Institution is not attractive to the general visitor and curiosity seeker; but the student of natural history will here find much that will be sought in vain elsewhere."² Recently the creation of exhibi-

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¹ Elmer Charles Herber, ed., *Correspondence Between Spencer Fullerton Baird and Louis Agassiz—Two Pioneer American Naturalists*, p. 7 (Washington, D. C., 1963).

² *An Account of the Smithsonian Institution*, p. 21 (Washington, 1857).

tions attractive to a mass audience has become one of the Smithsonian's most significant activities and the one most commonly identified in the public mind with the name of its founder.

Naturally, in an organization as varied as the Smithsonian, with as varied a history, it has not been possible to differentiate mutually exclusive categories of manuscripts, three-dimensional objects, books, experimental apparatus, and so forth. The Smithsonian possesses important collections in all of these forms, including significant manuscript treasures. In the Division of Political History, for example, there exist several small manuscript collections, some of which form parts of larger collections of three-dimensional objects. The Halderman collection contains over 150 letters concerning the career of Maj. Gen. John A. Halderman, first United States diplomatic representative in Siam, 1880-85, and includes letters from U. S. Grant, P. T. Barnum, the King of Siam, and others. Few scholars would think to look in the Smithsonian Institution for such papers, and unfortunately the Smithsonian is not represented in the National Union Catalog of Manuscript Collections, nor are there adequate internal guides to such papers.

Some of the major Smithsonian organizations, such as the Smithsonian Archives, the Smithsonian Library, the Bureau of American Ethnology Archives, and the Freer Gallery, have contributed very brief summaries of their manuscript holdings to *A Guide to Archives and Manuscripts in the United States*,³ but no report of manuscript holdings of other units within the Smithsonian was sent to the National Historical Publications Commission. Philip Bishop, Head Curator of the Department of Arts and Manufactures, however, has prepared a brief guide to the manuscript collections of the Smithsonian Institution from materials contributed by the curators of the several divisions.⁴

The Smithsonian Archives contains perhaps the greatest manuscript collection of the Institution, including the correspondence that passed between the leading scientific figures of the nineteenth century at a time when the Smithsonian was a leader in the increase of knowledge. These manuscripts have been little used by historians of science, but their potential value has been discussed by scholars in such symposia as the Conference on Science Manuscripts held in Washington, D. C., May 5-6, 1960, under a grant from the Na-

³ Philip M. Hamer, ed. (New Haven, 1961).

⁴ Dr. Bishop's study, "Le Musée d'Histoire et de Technologie de la Smithsonian Institution, centre d'informations et de documentation iconographique," was published in *Documents pour l'histoire des techniques*, no. 3 (*Revue d'histoire des sciences*, t. 16, no. 4, oct.-déc. 1963).

tional Science Foundation. An example of the occasional use made of such material is afforded by *Correspondence Between Spencer Fullerton Baird and Louis Agassiz—Two Pioneer American Naturalists*, edited by Elmer Charles Herber and published by the Smithsonian in 1963.

Rather than catalog particular manuscript collections, however, I should like to discuss what I regard as the unjustifiable theoretical distinction between manuscripts and museum objects. This distinction is made primarily by university scholars in the humanities and in some of the social sciences, but unfortunately it is reinforced by some in the museum world who speak of a dichotomy between "idea-oriented" scholars and "object-oriented" scholars.

I would challenge the concept because I think it confuses the particular vehicle of an idea with the idea itself. The important distinction is not between the written word and the material object but between the specific fact and the general idea. The specific fact may be either in the form of a written document—a manuscript—or a material artifact or "manufact" (if I may be permitted to use an archaic term to demonstrate the close relationship of the artifact and the manuscript). The historian has an obligation to the specific before he plunges into the general, and it is this responsibility that unifies the manuscript and the manufact. Too often the historian wishes to skip the process of establishing the specific fact before he explains the general meaning. It is here that the real conflict exists.

Too often the university-trained scholar assumes that the manuscript in the library can tell him what happened, whereas the object in the museum can merely illustrate the fact. Let us remember, however, that the written word is the Johnny-come-lately of scholarship. The greater part of the history of mankind is "written" in the tools with which man worked and in the objects that he constructed. The manufact is the expression of the culture and activities of most of the world's early history and the archeologist is its prime interpreter.

Manufacts have continued to be produced since the invention of writing and can be "read" in the absence of, or in conjunction with, manuscripts. Not only archeologists, but historians, anthropologists, technologists, and others are interpreters of manufacts. These individuals often know many nonwritten "languages" (which are nevertheless means of expression) through their knowledge of the different classes, properties, and histories of manufacts, just as the traditional scholar knows many written languages that lead to an understanding of the varied manuscripts with which he deals.

The understanding of phenomena often depends upon a com-

petence in handling both of these vehicles of expression—manuscripts and manufacts. Often, manuscripts must play a role subordinate to manufacts in the process of gaining and communicating knowledge. A manuscript describing the dimensions and price of a certain object can be invaluable to the museum scholar attempting to document a piece in his collections, but it can never express in its own right the beauty or ugliness of the piece. This can be “read” only in the piece itself by a mind trained to discriminate in these matters.

The few manuscript remains concerning the three ships that brought the first settlers to Virginia have none of the power to *represent* that experience that the reconstructed ships have, despite the imaginative assumptions made in building them. Anyone who has seen the Virginia ships at Jamestown or, better still, sailed in them on the Chesapeake Bay knows how forceful an expression of the meaning of a seventeenth-century sea voyage these objects are.

How forceful in revealing the tastes and characters of the Presidents and their wives is the china selected for use in the White House! One has only to glance at the examples in the Smithsonian's collection to perceive the grace and dignity of the china of President Washington and some other early Presidents, the unabashed experimentation of some of the late nineteenth-century china, and the cold formality of most of the twentieth-century china. Words cannot tell the story so well as the mute plates do.

Many other manufacts have a greater power to express meaning than their closest equivalents in the manuscript field. In the Division of Political History we are avid collectors of political campaign paraphernalia because we think that such objects are often more effective documents in the history of American political life than are political expressions conveyed through the medium of the written or printed word. Some of the banners in our collection evoke a more immediate political response than many reams of inscribed paper.⁵ Our knowledge of the communication process is still too sketchy to enable us to judge with precision what is effective and what is not, but the power of symbolic representation—the field in which objects rather than words provide the means of communication—is vast and compelling. One need only think of some outstanding American political symbols—the log cabin, the rail-splitter, the full dinner pail—to become aware of the fact.

⁵ The Smithsonian has important collections of campaign memorabilia from 1800 up to, and including, the campaign of 1960, in which television played such a key role. An attempt to capture the significance of a portion of this material has been made in Wilcomb E. Washburn, “The Great Autumnal Madness: Political Symbolism in Mid-Nineteenth-Century America,” in *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 49:417-431 (Dec. 1963).

If the manuscript and the manufact are equivalent in meaningfulness, why has the manufact been comparatively ignored and slighted in the intellectual world? I suggest that it may be the *use* to which the two sources of knowledge have been put. In the one case, manuscripts have been carefully collected by individuals and institutions for eventual use by the scholar, by whom they may be edited and published or otherwise used in the standard tradition of scholarship. In the other case, manufactures have too frequently been collected primarily for their public display value, not for scholarly use. Sometimes the distinction is not perceived by museum officials. Intent on filling museum exhibit halls, concerned with meeting what it conceives to be its responsibility to educate the public, the museum may often find a more ready justification for purchasing a specimen that will fill an exhibit need than for supporting a research project the scholarly results of which cannot be foreseen. I do not speak of specific museums in this connection but only of a subtle shift in emphasis—in some museums in this country—from a primary concern with uncovering new knowledge to an attempt to communicate existing knowledge directly to the general public. Of course, some museums both increase knowledge and communicate existing knowledge. But not all.

We can all remember the old days of manuscript collecting, when a signature would be neatly cut out and preserved although the body of a letter would often be discarded. Something of the same spirit is evident when one continues an archeological excavation only to the point at which sufficient “show” objects have been obtained. Few reputable institutions would impose such limitations, but the gap between reputable institutions and irresponsible “pot hunters” is not completely void. Both the manuscript and the manufact have their public or “show” function, whether in the form of a quotation from an original document in a popular secondary work or in the form of an object in a museum display case; but to serve also for scholarly purposes these objects must be collected fully, examined thoroughly, and interpreted accurately before they are allowed to reach the general public.

It has always been possible to confuse the outward form of a fact with its essential meaning. The student confuses the passing of an examination with the acquisition of knowledge. The advertising man concentrates on the external indications of success rather than upon the internal components. When the museum has sought to acquire and to satisfy a mass market, it has sometimes confused the ends its manufactures were meant to serve with their external, publicly

perceived form. While the manuscript has remained the building block of the literary historian who has conveyed its meaning to the public in a second step, the manufacture has too frequently been placed in the hands of the display artist for direct transmittal to the public. True, these objects have been "interpreted" by carefully prepared labels, but these labels are frequently ignored or casually sampled.

To understand a manuscript one must have knowledge and time; to understand a manufacture demands the same requirements. Neither knowledge nor time, however, is necessary to see a manufacture. The museum visitor is encouraged to see and to understand, but little concern is shown when he fails to understand. The negative effects of misunderstanding are not usually assessed. Shortening labels, making exhibit cases more attractive, and creating special lighting effects may bring more visitors to see an exhibit, but whether these measures create more understanding is often difficult to know. The total amount of understanding in a crowd of a thousand spectators at a new exhibit may be less than that in a handful of people viewing an old exhibit. It is easy to confuse the symbols of success with success itself.

It may be that the curator of manuscripts has been saved from the problems facing the curator of manufactures through no virtue of his own. But whether or not credit should adhere to him personally, his rigid concern with seeing that the written record of our past is utilized for scholarly purposes as well as for popular purposes should be an example to curators of those companion keys to the past—manufactures.

GONDOS MEMORIAL AWARD

1964 Competition

See page 268 for contest rules.