



A FIELD GUIDE



Collect(ive):

THE GRINNELL PEOPLE'S MUSEUM

A COMMUNITY COLLABORATION

WITH MARGUERITE PERRET AND

BRUCE SCHERTING

Object Lessons

MARGUERITE PERRET, AUGUST 2010

“...one can argue that the home contains the most special objects: those that were selected by the person to attend to regularly or to have close at hand...and therefore that are most involved in making up his or her identity.”

FROM THE MEANING OF THINGS, DOMESTIC SYMBOLS AND THE SELF, *MIHALY CSIKSZENTMIHALYI AND EUGENE ROCHBERG-HALTON*.

We are not the only creatures that covet objects simply because they are interesting or decorative. The male bowerbird of Australia famously gathers colorful baubles—from feathers and shells, to bits of discarded plastic—to decorate its grassy courtship shelter (the bower). The more colorful the ornaments, the more successful he is in attracting a mate. Magpies weave foil candy wrappers, ribbons and other trinkets into their nests. Brown rats like coins and metal objects while packrats (or wood rats) are not so particular. A collection held at the Kansas Historical Society is composed of mid-19th century artifacts discovered in an old packrat nest. Examples of the acquisitions made by these bucktooth curators include a cloth doll, a razor, eyeglasses, a brass whistle and a set of dishes (“Packrats help Preserve History,” Matt Moline, *The Topeka Capital-Journal*, Friday, February 09, 2001).

Of course humans are a whole different animal. While we, too, are dazzled by all that glitters, and keep junk drawers that sometimes rival the pack rat; we also imbue our objects with stories, emotions and desires. As with all things human, it is complicated. Our things serve as mementos, they connect us to places, ideas, people and groups; they are touchstones to the parts of our identities and histories that are not always visible. Things are exchanged, gifted, bought and sold. We interpret objects as cultural signifiers, maintain teaching collections and communicate through art and design.

I have on my desk a set of flying saucer salt and peppershakers from the mid-1950s. This bit of nostalgia from a childhood that predates my own makes me feel optimistic, as if the whole universe is alive and filled with possibility. My decision to buy them at a flea market several years ago speaks more to my longings than to how the object is rooted to its time. Nearby is a pink foil-covered eyeglass

case, to replace the boring one provided by the optometrist that I thought I lost, but later found, but chose not to use anymore anyway. I also like shiny things.

If I were to look on the desks of everyone in my town, I would learn a lot about each person, and about my community—where we work, what we do for fun, our values, our priorities. It would be a snapshot of how we live in this place at this time in history right now. This is the idea behind *Collect(ive): The Grinnell People’s Museum*.

On February 13, 2010 artist Bruce Scherting and I started collecting scanned images of personal articles brought in by Grinnell residents during a Faulconer Gallery Community Day. The only requirements were that the objects be three-dimensional (no photographs), fit on the scanner bed, and that the owner of the objects tell us why these things are significant to them. For the next several months the project continued with onsite scanning sessions at various locations: schools, businesses, organizations, and government offices. Concurrently we photographed and scanned items in the Grinnell College collections. The process was both practical and conceptually necessary. Our goal was not to exhibit the real objects, but to collect information about them. Both the camera and scanner are tools of the documentary, and the scanner in particular creates a sense of looking at something through glass, as if it was already on display in a museum case.

And the stories are funny, moving, universal and local:

A stuffed lion from Iran that “my cousin surprised me with at the Tehran airport saying goodbye. I brought it to Grinnell because of the safety and comfort I feel when I have it.”

A naphtha cleaner bottle “from Matthew’s Rexall Drugstore where Godfather’s Pizza is now.”

A crocheted hat Grandma Belle made in 1971 that “reminds me of all the fun I had in high school.”

A pendant in the shape of an infinity symbol, a gift from my husband because “most of my life revolves around Grinnell, the college and the community and my expanding family. My life is Grinnell, from childhood and now through Grandmotherhood!”

What is left to say? Welcome to Grinnell!

Definitions

Collect-verb

To bring together in a group or mass; gather.

To accumulate as a hobby or for study.

Collective-adjective

Formed by collection. Of, relating to, characteristic of, or made by a number of people acting as a group.

AMERICAN HERITAGE DICTIONARY,
FOURTH EDITION, 2009

Material Culture-noun

A study of human made objects, artworks, architectural spaces, technologies, and resources of a particular group, location or historical period. Highly interdisciplinary in nature, the study of material culture incorporates anthropology, geography, economics, art history, psychology, political science and philosophy. It is based on the assumption that an object is imbued with meaning by its fabricator and the context in which it is used or appreciated. Material culture is all around us.

DERIVED FROM VARIOUS SOURCES

Artists-plural noun

People who make, draw from and critique material culture.

Scanned Object Acquisition Form

General information

- Item #:
- Location:
- Your Name (Optional):
- The object, what is it?
- Provenance: Where did you get it? From whom? When?
- Significance: What story does your item tell us about Grinnell? About you or the person it belonged to? Please write a few sentences to tell us about the object.

Sensory qualities of the object

- What colors are used on the object?
- Does it have texture (smooth, bumpy, hard, cold)?
- Does it have a smell?
- Does it make a sound?
- What might it taste like? Use your imagination only!
- Is it heavy or light for its size?
- What shape is it? Is it a part of something else? Does it have moveable parts?

Production and function

- What is it made of (paper, wood, plastic, ceramic, metal, other)? Is it human formed or did it come from nature?
- How was it made? By hand or machine? Cast, carved or sewn? If natural, did it grow or was it formed in the Earth?
- What is it used for? If it's functional what does it do? Is it for play or is it for decoration? Many objects can have more than one use!

Personal and community significance

- How does it make you feel (nostalgic, happy, sad, proud or inspired)? Does it have personal significance?
- Does it relate to a person or a group? Is it a memento of a loved one, or something from a community or church organization?
- If found 1000 years from now, what would this object tell people about you and your life in Grinnell?

Item #: 213001

COLLECTION DATE:

February 13, 2010

LOCATION:

Faulconer Gallery

NAME:

Lesley Wright

OBJECT:

Cast of half an ear of corn, plaster with red paint, created by Jeff Morrison, artist, Minneapolis

MY CONNECTION TO GRINNELL:

Current resident, college employee

PROVENANCE OF OBJECT:

Received as a gift from the artist, as a thank you for including him in the exhibition "Roots of Renewal," 2003.

SIGNIFICANCE:

"Roots of Renewal" was an exhibition about art of the contemporary Midwest. Jeff's piece had to do with agriculture and agribusiness and corn is enmeshed in that mess in fundamental ways. This piece of corn reminds me of Jeff, of his artwork, of the exhibition. But it also will always connect me with the miles of corn that surround Grinnell.



Item #: 213023

COLLECTION DATE:

March 4, 2010

LOCATION:

Mayflower Homes

NAME:

Elaine Bigbee

MY CONNECTION TO GRINNELL:

Mayflower resident. Born and raised Hartwick.

DESCRIPTION:

Wilder Grain Company Rain Gauge.

PROVENANCE OF OBJECT:

Advertising—promotional give-away.

SIGNIFICANCE:

This is from around the time I was in high school. I graduated in 1945. Wilder Grain Company owned the grain elevator by the train track; the line was called the Pumpkin Vine. It went just a short distance, but was important to the grain farmers. We didn't have much grain for sale; mainly what we grew was feed for our hogs. They still have an elevator in Hartwick that does some business, but not like before. The train doesn't run anymore.



Item #: 213045

COLLECTION DATE:

March 15, 2010

LOCATION:

CERA
(Conard Environmental Research Area)

NAME:

Larissa Mottl

MY CONNECTION TO GRINNELL:

Job related—CERA Manager

DESCRIPTION:

Leather Gloves

PROVENANCE OF OBJECT:

Purchased two years ago.

SIGNIFICANCE:

Leather gloves are part of work life at the Grinnell College Conard Environmental Research Area. They encounter heat and ash during burns of prairie, savanna, and forest. They encounter the tough skin of salvaged firewood from our savanna and woodland restoration. They encounter thorns and prickles of impenetrable multi-flora rose thickets and brambles of blackberry, black raspberry, and gooseberry. They encounter the hands of a mother of two young children, for whom all these encounters have new purpose and importance.



Item #: 213050

COLLECTION DATE:

March 16, 2010

LOCATION:

New Horizons Alternative High School

NAME:

Geoffrey Peak

MY CONNECTION TO GRINNELL:

Lifelong

DESCRIPTION:

Mason 1-pint jar containing rock salt and many pairs of the front feet of pocket gophers.

PROVENANCE OF OBJECT:

I found it last year on my folks' garage workbench—about 60 years old.

SIGNIFICANCE:

I need to turn them in for the bounty money! Dad only goes to Monte a couple times a year—property taxes and car license, where are they?? There they are! The Mason pint jar filled with pocket gopher feet packed in rock salt—lost about 60 years ago and found today, 2009, right where they should have been way back then. Guess I will never collect the \$1.50-\$2.00 fortune in bounty money!



Item #: 213054

COLLECTION DATE:

March 16, 2010

LOCATION:

New Horizons Alternative High School

NAME:

Lori Francis

MY CONNECTION TO GRINNELL:

Resident

DESCRIPTION:

New Horizons Bell

PROVENANCE OF OBJECT:

The bell was given to New Horizons by a former staff member, Nancy Gause.

SIGNIFICANCE:

Shortly after New Horizons was established (in 1992) as Grinnell's Alternative High School Program, we began a tradition of cheering whenever a student earned a credit. Because the students work at their own pace to earn credits needed for graduation, credits are earned and awarded at any time. Our colleague brought the old bell in and began to ring it...followed by cheering and applause. The tradition continued for many, many years until a significant disruption in staffing, administration and space occurred. We are starting to ring the bell again.



Item #: 213062

COLLECTION DATE:

March 16, 2010

LOCATION:

New Horizons Alternative High School

NAME:

Latesha Gordon

MY CONNECTION TO GRINNELL:

Student, Family

DESCRIPTION:

Keys to my first home and car

PROVENANCE OF OBJECT:

Part of my new life

SIGNIFICANCE:

These objects connect me to my Grinnell family, Lori, Geoff and Jim, and show the accomplishment of a struggle for me to finally feel in place where I am and settle down.



Item #: 213074

COLLECTION DATE:

March 20, 2010

LOCATION:

Home Show

NAME:

Janet Davis

MY CONNECTION TO GRINNELL:

Grinnell College Faculty

DESCRIPTION:

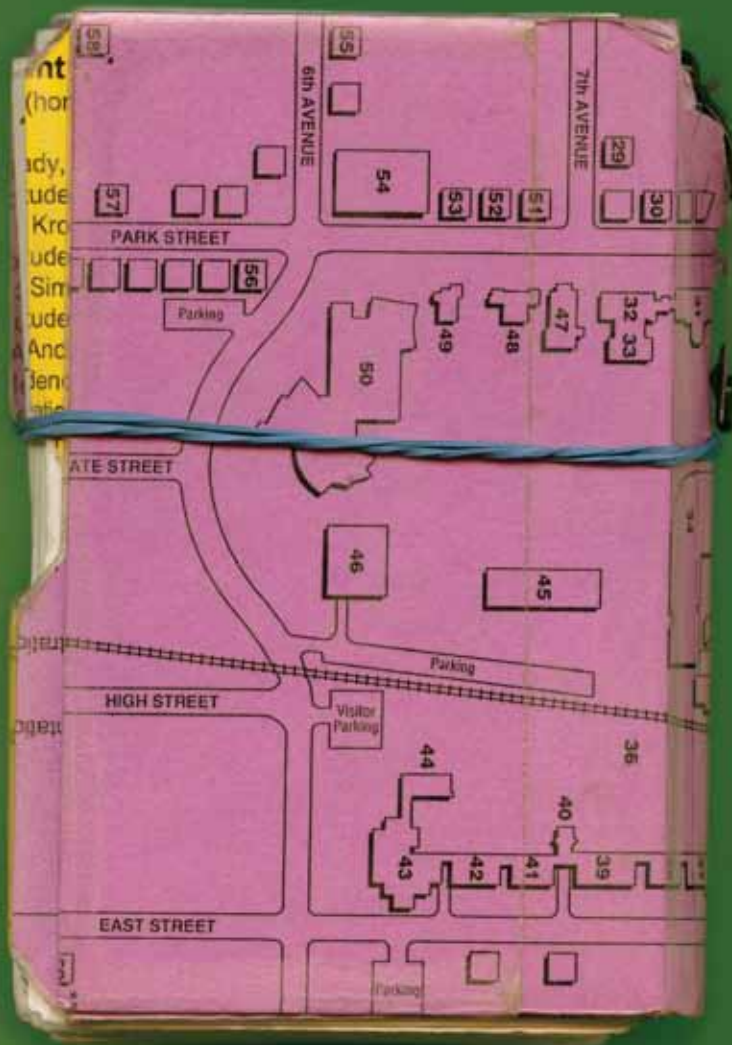
My Planner

PROVENANCE OF OBJECT:

I made it. It's about 2 years old.

SIGNIFICANCE:

A while ago, I gave up using my PDA and decided to switch to a Hipster PDA—keeping track of my calendar and to-do list on index cards. I made this binder out of old Grinnell College Directory covers because I like the idea of reusing something that would otherwise be thrown away.



Item #: 213081

COLLECTION DATE:

March 20, 2010

LOCATION:

Home Show

NAME:

Robert W. Baumann

MY CONNECTION TO GRINNELL:

Practiced dentistry in Grinnell from 1960 to 2007.

DESCRIPTION:

Watch with Spaulding Watch Fob.

PROVENANCE OF OBJECT:

This fob was given to me in 1961 by a patient whose husband worked for Spaulding.

SIGNIFICANCE:

I have an interest in pocket watches, which adds interest to the fob.



Item #: 213089

COLLECTION DATE:

May 7, 2010

LOCATION:

Write On Program at the Grinnell Area Arts Council

NAME:

Ruth Dickey-Chasins

MY CONNECTION TO GRINNELL:

Current resident.

DESCRIPTION:

Eye Patch

PROVENANCE OF OBJECT:

I got it in fifth grade from my teacher, five years ago at the Middle School.

SIGNIFICANCE:

It protects your eye when it is injured.

My fifth grade teacher gave it to me the year she retired. It is so bizarre it just always makes people want to look through it.

I like that.



Item #: 213195

COLLECTION DATE:

May 5, 2010

LOCATION:

City Hall

NAME:

Mayor Gordon R. Canfield

MY CONNECTION TO GRINNELL:

Mayor, City of Grinnell

DESCRIPTION:

Cup for sipping mineral water

PROVENANCE OF OBJECT:

Souvenir of trip to Zheleznovodsk, Russia

SIGNIFICANCE:

Grinnell's Sister City in Russia is in the Mineral Waters District in the Stavropol Krai. Zheleznovodsk is noted for its mineral water health sanatoriums. Visitors sip the water in these "sippy" cups and also bathe in it.

Gifts presented to the Grinnell Mayor or other city officials are accepted on behalf of the citizens of Grinnell and are kept in the display case in the community building.



Item #: 213122

COLLECTION DATE:

May 17, 2010

LOCATION:

Saints Rest Coffee House and Art Gallery

NAME:

Sheryl Parmley

MY CONNECTION TO GRINNELL:

Employee of the Grinnell Area Chamber of Commerce

DESCRIPTION:

Signal Horn

PROVENANCE OF OBJECT:

Horn is one year old.

SIGNIFICANCE:

The horn is used as a signal to start the Farmer's Market on Thursdays in Central Park. Farmer's Market starts Thursday, May 20 and runs to Thursday, October 28. The Saturday's Farmer's Market uses a whistle and starts Saturday, May 22 and runs to Saturday, October 30.



Item #: 213131

COLLECTION DATE:

May 17, 2010

LOCATION:

Saints Rest Coffee House and Art Gallery

NAME:

Jeffrey Phelps

MY CONNECTION TO GRINNELL:

Born and raised, graduated from Grinnell College, owns Saints Rest

DESCRIPTION:

Grinnell College Pin

PROVENANCE OF OBJECT:

Bought it freshman year at Grinnell College in 1967, not sure of age.

SIGNIFICANCE:

I bought this pin from Mr. Wassom at the Grinnell College Bookstore. I got it for very little money because it was "old stock" in 1967. It was my 1st year present to myself. I wore it on my sport coat lapel...until I quit wearing sports coats.



Item #: 213140

COLLECTION DATE:

May 17, 2010

LOCATION:

Davis Elementary School After School
Program

NAME:

Mira

MY CONNECTION TO GRINNELL:

3rd Grade, Davis School

DESCRIPTION:

Sharpener

PROVENANCE OF OBJECT:

Got it from a friend.

SIGNIFICANCE:

I carry it around because it gives me good
luck. Its name is Sharpen. It makes me
happy because it's colorful and interesting.



Marguerite Perret is a mixed media installation artist who explores connections between art, science, medicine, and cultural history. She is an associate professor of art and design at Washburn University (Topeka, Kansas) where she teaches digital imaging, foundations design, and courses in art and ecology, and science and art. Current projects include *A Floating World*, with Robin Lasser and Bruce Scherting, a public art project that will be on view during the *01SJ Biennial 2010: Build Your Own World* (San Jose, California); *The Waiting Room* (with Robin Lasser, Stephanie Lanter and Bruce Scherting), a multi-media installation exploring issues on women's health care; and *The Simulated Garden* which documents rare and recently extinct species that exist only or primarily as specimens in US and UK museums.

Bruce Scherting is Director of Exhibits and Design at the University of Kansas Biodiversity Institute Natural History Museum (Lawrence, Kansas) and teaches in the Graduate Museum Studies Program. Previously he worked for the University of Iowa Natural History Museum, Iowa and the Shedd Aquarium and Field Museum in Chicago, Illinois. Perret and Scherting have collaborated on large-scale installation projects for over a decade.

This publication documents a component of *Culturing Community: Projects about Place*, curated by Lesley Wright and presented at Falconer Gallery, Grinnell College (Grinnell, Iowa) from September 24 to December 12, 2010. grinnell.edu/falconergallery

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