

# The Social Life in a 19th Century Engraved Drawing of St Salvator's Chapel in St Andrews: an Object Biography

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During the summer vacation of 2020, I bought a 19th-century engraved drawing from an online used-bookstore in Beijing depicting St Salvator's Chapel in St Andrews. After researching the artist, I found it was originally a book page detached from *The Baronial and Ecclesiastical Antiquities of Scotland* written and illustrated by Robert. W. Billings (1845). As a Chinese student studying at the University of St Andrews, I was very excited to have it in my collection, for it has traveled from the UK to China and resembles my own experience of being an international member of the community. Soon, I became exceptionally curious about this print's histories as well as the social contexts it carries: what happened to the social relations that the object represents when its meanings are accumulated and shifted over its century-long life? With this question in mind, I decided to write an object biography for this print and discover its evolving social meanings with reference to social anthropology's material culture studies developed by Hoskin (2006: 74).

The making of the engraved drawing's biography involves several steps. To begin, I will set the methodological and theoretical framework of understanding objects in the considerations of their social life. In terms of the method, anthropologists often consider an object as having a social life. Thus, we can generate its biography to highlight its change in space, time, and movement as a form of ethnographic approach revealing its transformations in social relations (Kopytoff, 1986). Furthermore, the social features of and the meanings developed during an object's transformation are also discussed through different theoretical debates (Appadurai 1986; Gosden & Marshall 1999; Edwards & Hart 2004). Taking from methodological and theoretical context, I will then delve deeper into the print's biography through three stages of its life cycle: 1) speculating stories before it ended up in the bookstore through an exploration of changes in its materiality; 2) stories when it was commodified for sale and my purchase of it as a form of exchange; and 3) my performance of giving new meanings to it after it came into my ownership. Conclusively, I will argue that the transformations in the social life of an object, such as the print, do not need to be in a 'single form' during every stage, but a process in multiple ways of transformations during its life cycle that includes accumulating meanings through its materiality, shifting meanings under commodity exchanges, and acquiring new meanings from performances.



Figure 1. photograph of the engraved drawing of St Salvator's Chapel, St Andrews, Scotland. 2020

## **Object Biography and the Social Life of Things: Method and Theory**

When we (re)act upon objects, they become reflections of our life. Hence, studying objects is also a study of social relations as we constantly “think through things” (Henare et al. 2006). Taking this viewpoint, anthropologists have surveyed objects not only in terms of their appearance and attributes, but also experiences and ways they have engaged within society such as gift, commodity, possession, or performative action (Mauss 1924; Appadurai 1988; Jhala 2006; Gosden & Marshall 1999). With this understanding, objects are not a lifeless material presence that is alienated from people but are treated as having a “social life” that can be studied like a person through people’s interactions with it (Appadurai 1986). Therefore, just like a person, an object can have its own biography that gives us insight to its social meanings.

The concept of an object’s biography in the anthropological study was firstly proposed by Kopytoff (1986: 66-67), who suggests that we cannot merely understand things at one point of their existence but should focus on different stages of their life cycle. Therefore, the point of an object biography is to highlight stages in its life by focusing on changes led by human interactions, such as material attributes, movement, or time (Hoskin 2006: 74). Through looking at these changes, we can understand the transformations in its social meanings which the object carries throughout its lifetime. As a result, object biographies becomes an ethnographic

method of understanding society through showcasing material things. Ultimately, while recognizing objects have their own social life, the implication of ‘biography’ becomes a method that focuses on temporal changes to understand transformations in socially imbued meaning.

Under the biographic method, there are many debates around what kind of social transformation an object experiences in their social life. Firstly, through analyzing exchanges of goods, Appadurai (1986: 13) suggests that objects can move between gifts and commodity; the transformation in the meaning of things is therefore reflected in the difference of exchange activity. However, Appadurai’s (1986) argument has been critiqued by Gosden & Marshall (1999: 174), who suggests that things do not need to be exchanged in order to gain meanings. Instead, they take the example of First Nation masks in the Pacific Northwest Coast of Canada, where masks only possess meaning through ceremonial performances. Gosden & Marshall (1999: 175) therefore argue that meanings can also be acquired from objects in the context of performing them. Lastly, Edwards & Hart (2004) focus on how a photograph’s meanings can be accumulated through its materiality. Edwards & Hart (2004: 3-6) argue that when examining things such as photographs, we should not only focus on their content as a “two-dimensional object”, but also on people’s engagement to the photographs’ materiality as a “three-dimensional object”. We can therefore trace a photograph’s social life through accumulations in its materiality such as

signatures, stamps, folds, or scratches, and understand their embedded social contexts. In summary, while Appadurai (1986) and Gosden & Marshall (1999) look at the social life of objects in terms of their shifted meanings and *how* meanings can be acquired, Edwards & Hart (2004) explore *when* an object's social meanings are accumulated.

Relating the methodological and theoretical framework back to my own argument, I will take my approach to the print in line with the analyses above. In relation to the method, I recognize that the print has its own social life and apply biographic analysis ethnographically, illustrating its changes in the three stages. I will then apply the theoretical debates, relating the arguments from Appadurai (1986), Gosden & Marshall (1999), and Edwards & Hart (2004) during each stage and illustrate transformations in the engraving's social meanings. Finally, I suggest when considering transformations of the engraving's social life, object biography becomes a process of combining changes in meaning through social exchange, performance, and materiality, to understand the object's cumulative meaning.

### **Stage One: Early Stories of the Engraved Drawing**

The first stage of the print's biography reveals stories before it ended up in the bookstore. Since this stage spans the majority of the engraving's life, much of its history has either been lost or blurred. I can only trace this part of the story from speculations of its signatures and material

features. According to the signatures, it was drawn by R.W. Billings and engraved by J. Godfrey. Billings was a 19th-century British architect focused on illustrations of cathedrals and churches. This drawing depicting St Salvator's Chapel was initially an engraved image in Billings's book, *The baronial and ecclesiastical antiquities of Scotland*, published in Edinburgh during 1845. Furthermore, material features are also important for tracing its past. Firstly, one edge of the engraved drawing is gilded, which is a common feature of books during the Victorian era (Zaehnsdorf 2007: 57). It suggests that the engraved drawing was indeed a book page from the original book and was somehow detached from the book to become an independent piece. Secondly, one of the most notable features of its materiality is on the back, where the drawing was stamped by a mark stating "Public Library, City of Lincoln". It suggests that before ended up in the used-book store, the drawing was once a collection from the library in Lincoln, England. In summary, the early story of the engraved drawing started as a book page when it was published in Edinburgh in 1845. It was then detached from the book at some point and was stamped when it became the collection of Lincoln city's public library. Lastly, it traveled across the world for unknown reasons and ultimately ended up in an online used-book store located in Beijing and became a merchandise to be sold.

The demonstration of the engraved drawing's early story is closely related to the argument proposed by Edwards & Hart (2004), who suggest meanings of

photographs can be accumulated through tracing their materiality. Although Edwards & Hart focus on photographs instead of drawings, the implications of the print is still similar in terms of its being a “three-dimensional object” (2004: 3). Linking the theory with the print, I was able to not only focus on the content, but also trace many of its added meanings by looking at its materiality and the social identities which they reflect. The signature indicates the artist who produced this drawing, while the feature of the gilded edge and the stamp informs us that it was detached from the book and was once kept in Lincoln’s public library before it came to the bookstore. The social transformations within this part of the object biography are therefore a process of accumulating meanings through changes in the print’s materiality by considering it as a three-dimensional object rather than simply looking at its two-dimensional content.

### Stage Two: A Commodity in Exchange

The second stage of the engraved drawing’s



Figure 2. Photograph of the stamp at the back of the engraved drawing. 2020

biography focuses on its status as a commodity in the store and my purchase of it. After the engraved drawing arrived at the used bookstore in Beijing, it was commodified and labeled for sale on its website. The bookstore’s discourse for the print described in Chinese:

Under the portrayal from the store, the engraved drawing of St Salvator’s Chapel was treated as an antique object that resonated with so-called “Victorian Glory”. It is therefore a commodity to be sold as a witness of this particular period of British history. However, when

Unquestionably, the Victorian age was the most glorious period during British History for it reached Britain’s peak status through industrial revolutions and imperialism. The British arts during this period also bloomed with many art-masters gaining prestige around the world. In the meanwhile, the development of the publishing industry also motivated those masters to participate in the production of engraved drawings.

I discovered the engraved drawing, I never related to it through the seller’s discourse around its Victorian context but instead related the drawing’s content with my own experience as a student who repeatedly visits the University Chapel depicted. Through looking at the Chapel’s image, a sense of intimacy and memory arose. On the one hand, it presents the building and

place where I have joined as a member of its community; on the other hand, the drawing also traveled across the world from Scotland to China, just as it resembles my own journey traveling from China to Scotland and becoming an international student studying far away from my home. This sense of personal attachments to the object's content ultimately motivated me to buy it.

The second stage of the print's social life describes how the bookstore and myself considered the object's meaning differently. It can be closely linked to the argument proposed by Appadurai (1986), who suggests while the commodities are being exchanged, their social status is also shifted. On the one hand, the commodity status of the engraved drawing in the bookstore was intended to be an antique served as a presentation and appreciation of the Victorian period. On the other hand, the value for me as a buyer is its depiction of a site of personal attachment. Therefore, my purchase of the engraved drawing becomes an example of commodity exchange that shifts the object's status from a historic antique into something related to personal feeling. As a result, the social transformation at in the second stage of the print's social life becomes the process of shifting meanings during exchanges of the object as commodity.

### **Stage Three: A showcase to be Framed**

Lastly, the third stage of the engraved drawing's biography tells stories after it comes into my ownership. When I purchased and received the engraved

drawing from the used-bookstore, I initially kept it on my living room's bookshelf. Later, I questioned to myself: if the engraved drawing is merely held inside the shelf and no one is able to view it, could it loses its special meaning as a representation of my memory and attachment to the university? Finally, I decided to make it a memorial object, carefully putting it in a photo frame and placing it at the entrance of my home, thus demonstrating my identity as a student at the University of St. Andrews. When my family, friends, or myself are entering my home, it becomes the first object we encounter. Through viewing its content, I can either share the stories of my university life to others or recall memories with it on my own. Therefore, after framing the engraved drawing and placing it at the entrance, it becomes an exhibition linking the content to my own identity as a member of the University. Today, this engraved drawing is still framed and placed at the entrance to my home, it greets my family and myself every time we return and tells stories of my journey living and studying at the special place in Scotland across the world from my home.

The third stage of the engraved drawing's social life can be linked to the argument posed by Gosden & Marshall (1999), who suggest things can also acquire meanings through performative activities. In the context of the print's biography, the performance is demonstrated through framing and placing it at the entrance of my home. As I put the engraved drawing in a frame, I embodied the meaning of showcasing my own identity in connection

to the University. Furthermore, when I placed it in the entrance of my home, it became a way of exhibiting my identity as a St. Andrews student at the forefront of my domestic space. As a result, the framing and placement of the engraved drawing can be regarded as a form of performative action that imposes my identity onto the object. The transformation of the print's social life in the third stage is therefore obtained when its meanings are acquired in performance.

### **Conclusion: Three Stages, One Social Life**

By looking at the three stages of the print's biography, I have analyzed how transformations of meanings during



Figure 3. Photograph of the engraved drawing framed at the entrance of my home. 2020

each stage are represented from different theoretical perspectives. In summary, the transformations of an object's social life from the three theoretical debates are presented in the respective forms of accumulation, shift, and acquirement.

Although three of the stages represent different forms of transformation, they are all rooted within one object's social life. Therefore, in my argument of the biography, I suggest the transformations of meanings within one object's social life does not need to be in a singular form but can be understood as multiple forms of transformations presented at different stages that can be arranged into a cohesive life-cycle.

Throughout this essay, I have argued that the engraved drawing's transformations of social meanings within different stages of its life is not necessarily singular but can be multiple forms. I have firstly outlined the method and different theoretical debates related to the object's social life and the focus of transformations in social meanings when making an object biography. Applying theories suggested by Edwards & Hart (2004), Appadurai (1986), and Gosden & Marshall (1999), I discuss the engraving and its biography in ethnographic terms. In the first stage, I relate arguments from Edwards & Harts (2004) and suggest the print's early history can be traced as an accumulation of meanings from its materiality. During the second stage, I have linked Appadurai's (1986) argument and illustrated how commodity exchanges between the bookstore and myself shifts the meaning of the print's value. The third stage of the engraved drawing's social life can be correlated to the argument from Gosden & Marshall (1999), where my activity of framing and placing the engraved drawing at the entrance to my home becomes a performance that acquire meanings for it. Among the three stages of the object

biography, I have suggested that although each stage represents different ways of transformation, they are all rooted from one social life within the print. Therefore, the social life of objects like this print are not limited to one 'way' of changing, but fluidly evolve meaning, value, and form over the course of their lives.

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