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# A History of the World in 100 Objects

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NEIL
MacGREGOR

# A history *of the* WORLD *in* *100* objects

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To all my colleagues at the British Museum

# *Introduction: Signals from the Past*

In this book we travel back in time and across the globe, to see how we humans have shaped our world and been shaped by it over the past two million years. The book tries to tell a history of the world in a way which has not been attempted before, by deciphering the messages which objects communicate across time – messages about peoples and places, environments and interactions, about different moments in history and about our own time as we reflect upon it. These signals from the past – some reliable, some conjectural, many still to be retrieved – are unlike other evidence we are likely to encounter. They speak of whole societies and complex processes rather than individual events, and tell of the world for which they were made, as well as of the later periods which reshaped or relocated them, sometimes having meanings far beyond the intention of their original makers. It is the things humanity has made, these meticulously shaped sources of history and their often curious journeys across centuries and millennia, which *A History of the World in 100 Objects* tries to bring to life. The book includes all sorts of objects, carefully designed and then either admired and preserved or used, broken and thrown away. They range from a cooking pot to a golden galleon, from a Stone Age tool to a credit card, and all of them come from the collection of the British Museum.

The history that emerges from these objects will seem unfamiliar to many. There are few well-known dates, famous battles or celebrated incidents. Canonical events – the making of the Roman Empire, the Mongol destruction of Baghdad, the European Renaissance, the Napoleonic wars, the bombing of Hiroshima – are not centre stage. They are, however, present, refracted through individual objects. The poli-

tics of 1939, for example, determined both how Sutton Hoo was excavated and how it was understood (Chapter 47). The Rosetta Stone is (as well as everything else) a document of the struggle between Britain and Napoleonic France (Chapter 33). The American War of Independence is seen here from the unusual perspective of a native American buckskin map (Chapter 88). Throughout, I have chosen objects that tell many stories rather than bear witness to one single event.

## *The Necessary Poetry of Things*

If you want to tell the history of the whole world, a history that does not unduly privilege one part of humanity, you cannot do it through texts alone, because only some of the world has ever had texts, while most of the world, for most of the time, has not. Writing is one of humanity's later achievements, and until fairly recently even many literate societies recorded their concerns and aspirations not only in writing but in things.

Ideally a history would bring together texts and objects, and some chapters of this book are able to do just that, but in many cases we simply can't. The clearest example of this asymmetry between literate and non-literate history is perhaps the first encounter, at Botany Bay, between Captain Cook's expedition and the Australian Aboriginals (Chapter 89). From the English side, we have scientific reports and the captain's log of that fateful day. From the Australian side, we have only a wooden shield dropped by a man in flight after his first experience of gunshot. If we want to reconstruct what was actually going on that day, the shield must be interrogated and interpreted as deeply and rigorously as the written reports.

In addition to the problem of mutual miscomprehension there are the accidental or deliberate distortions of victory. It is, as we know, the victors who write the history, especially when only the victors know how to write. Those who are on the losing side, those whose societies are conquered or destroyed, often have only their things to tell their stories. The Caribbean Taino, the Australian Aboriginals, the African people of Benin and the Incas, all of whom appear in this book, can speak to us now of their past achievements most powerfully through

the objects they made: a history told through things gives them back a voice. When we consider contact between literate and non-literate societies such as these, all our first-hand accounts are necessarily skewed, only one half of a dialogue. If we are to find the other half of that conversation, we have to read not just the texts, but the objects.

All so much easier said than done. Writing history from the study of texts is a familiar process, and we have centuries of critical apparatus to assist our assessment of written records. We have learnt how to judge their frankness, their distortions, their ploys. With objects, we do of course have structures of expertise – archaeological, scientific, anthropological – which allow us to ask critical questions. But we have to add to that a considerable leap of imagination, returning the artefact to its former life, engaging with it as generously, as poetically, as we can in the hope of winning the insights it may deliver.

For many cultures, if we are to know anything about them at all, this is the only way forward. The Moche culture of Peru, for example, now survives solely through the archaeological record. A Moche pot in the shape of a warrior (Chapter 48) is one of our few starting points for recovering who these people were and understanding how they lived, how they saw themselves and their world. It is a complex and uncertain process in which objects now reachable only through layers of cultural translation have to be rigorously scrutinized and then re-imagined. The Spanish conquest of the Aztecs, for instance, has masked for us the Aztec conquest of the Huastec people: because of these revolutions of history the voice of the Huastec is now recoverable only at two removes, through a Spanish version of what the Aztecs told them. What did the Huastec themselves think? They left no textual record to tell us, but the material culture of the Huastec does survive in figures such as a five-foot-high stone goddess (Chapter 69), whose identity was roughly equated first with the Aztec mother goddess Tlazolteotl and later with the Virgin Mary. These sculptures are the primary documents of Huastec religious thought, and while their precise meaning remains opaque, their numinous presence sends us back to the second-hand accounts of the Aztecs and Spaniards with new perceptions and sharper questions – but still ultimately reliant on our own intuitions about what is at issue in this dialogue with the gods.

Such acts of imaginative interpretation and appropriation are

essential in any history told through things. These were methods of understanding familiar to the founders of the British Museum, who saw the recuperation of past cultures as an essential foundation for understanding our common humanity. The collectors and scholars of the Enlightenment brought to the task both a scientific ordering of facts, and a rare capacity for poetic reconstruction. It was an enterprise being pursued simultaneously on the other side of the world. The Qianlong emperor in China, an almost exact contemporary of George III, in the middle of the eighteenth century was also engaged in gathering, collecting, classifying, categorizing, exploring the past, making dictionaries, compiling encyclopaedias and writing about what he had discovered, on the surface just like an eighteenth-century European gentleman scholar. One of the many things he collected was a jade ring or *bi* (Chapter 90), very like jade rings found in the tombs of the Zhang Dynasty about 1500 BC. Their use is still unknown today, but they are certainly objects of high status and very beautifully made. The Qianlong emperor admired the strange elegance of the jade *bi* he found and began to speculate what it was for. His approach was as much imaginative as scholarly: he could see it was very old, and he reviewed all the broadly comparable objects he knew about, but beyond that he was baffled. So, characteristically for him, he wrote a poem about his attempt to make sense of it. And then, perhaps rather shockingly to us, he had his poem inscribed on the prized object itself – a poem in which he concludes that the beautiful *bi* was meant to be a bowl stand, so he'll put a bowl on it.

Although the Qianlong emperor came to the wrong conclusion about the purpose of the *bi,* I confess I admire his method. Thinking about the past or about a distant world through things is always about poetic re-creation. We acknowledge the limits of what we can know with certainty, and must then try to find a different kind of knowing, aware that objects must have been made by people essentially like us – so we should be able to puzzle out why they might have made them and what they were for. It may sometimes be the best way to grasp what much of the world is about, not just in the past but in our own time. Can we ever really understand others? Perhaps, but only through feats of poetic imagination, combined with knowledge rigorously acquired and ordered.

The Qianlong emperor is not the only poet in this history. Shelley's response to Ramesses II – his Ozymandias - tells us nothing about the making of the statue in ancient Egypt, but a great deal about early nineteenth-century fascination with the transience of empire. In the great ship burial of Sutton Hoo (Chapter 47), two poets are at work: Beowulf's epic tale is recovered in historical reality, while Seamus Heaney's evocation of the warrior helmet gives an urgent topicality to this famous piece of Anglo-Saxon body-armour. A history through things is impossible without poets.

## *The Survival of Things*

A history of the world told through objects should therefore, with sufficient imagination, be more equitable than one based solely on texts. It allows many different peoples to speak, especially our ancestors in the very distant past. The early part of human history – more than 95 per cent of humanity's story as a whole – can indeed be told only in stone, for besides human and animal remains, stone objects are all that survive.

A history through objects, however, can never itself be fully balanced because it depends entirely on what happens to survive. It is particularly harsh on cultures whose artefacts are made mostly of organic materials, and especially so where climate will cause such things to decay: for most of the tropical world, very little survives from the distant past. In many cases, the oldest organic artefacts we have are those collected by the first European visitors: two of the objects in this book, for example, were gathered by the expeditions of Captain Cook – the Australian aboriginal bark shield already mentioned (Chapter 89) and the Hawaiian feather helmet (Chapter 87) – in each case acquired at the very first moment of contact between these societies and Europeans. Of course both Hawaii and south-east Australia had complex societies, producing elaborate artefacts, long before then. But virtually none of these earlier artefacts made from wood, plants or feathers has survived, so the early stories of those cultures are now hard to tell. A rare exception is the 2500-year-old textile

fragment from mummies in Paracas (Chapter 24), preserved by the exceptionally dry conditions in the deserts of Peru.

Things do not, however, need to survive intact to yield enormous amounts of information. In 1948, dozens of small pottery fragments were found by an alert beach-comber at the bottom of a cliff at Kilwa in Tanzania (Chapter 60). They were, quite literally, rubbish: broken bits of crockery thrown away and of no use to anyone. But as he gathered them together he came to realise that in these pot sherds lay the story of East Africa a thousand years ago. Indeed, examination of their variety reveals a whole history of the Indian Ocean, because once we look at them closely, it is clear that these fragments come from widely different places. A green sherd and a blue-and-white one are clearly fragments of porcelain manufactured in huge quantities in China for export. Other pieces bear Islamic decoration and are from Persia and the Gulf. Still others derive from indigenous East African earthenware.

These ceramics – all used, we think, by the same people, all broken and thrown on the rubbish dump at roughly the same time – demonstrate what was for long beyond the view of Europe: that between AD 1000 and 1500, the East African coast was in contact with the whole of the Indian Ocean. There was regular trade between China, Indonesia, India, the Gulf and East Africa, and raw materials and finished commodities were circulating widely. This was possible because in contrast to the Atlantic, where the winds are very disobliging, the winds in the Indian Ocean blow kindly from the south-east for six months of the year and from the north-west for the other six, allowing sailors to set out over huge distances and be reasonably certain of getting home. The Kilwa fragments demonstrate that the Indian Ocean is in effect an enormous lake across which cultures have been communicating for millennia, where traders bring not only things but ideas, and the communities around whose shores are every bit as connected as those around the Mediterranean. One of the things this object history makes clear is that the very word 'Mediterranean' – 'the sea at the centre of the earth' – is misconceived. It is not at the centre of the Earth, and is just one among many marine cultures. We shan't of course find another word for it, but perhaps we should.

## *The Biographies of Things*

This book might perhaps have been more accurately titled *A History of Objects Through Many Different Worlds*, for one of the characteristics of things is that they so often change – or are changed – long after they have been created, taking on meanings that could never have been imagined at the outset.

A startlingly large number of our objects bear on them the marks of later events. Sometimes this is merely the damage that comes with time, like the broken headdress on the Huastec goddess, or from clumsy excavation or forceful removal. But frequently, later interventions were designed deliberately to change meaning or to reflect the pride or pleasures of new ownership. The object becomes a document not just of the world for which it was made, but of the later periods which altered it. The Jomon pot (Chapter 10), for example, speaks of the precocious Japanese achievement in ceramics and the origins of stews and soups many thousands of years ago, but its gilded inside tells of a later, aestheticizing Japan, conscious now of its own particular traditions, revisiting and honouring its long history: the object has become a commentary on itself. The African wooden slit drum (Chapter 94) is an even more remarkable example of an object's many lives. Made in the shape of a calf for a ruler probably in the northern Congo, it was re-branded as an Islamic object in Khartoum, and then, captured by Lord Kitchener, carved with Queen Victoria's crown and sent to Windsor – a wooden narrative of conquests and empires. I do not think any text could combine so many histories of Africa and Europe, nor make them so powerfully immediate. This is a history only a thing can tell.

Two objects in the book are disconcertingly material tales of changed allegiances and of structures that failed, showing two different faces to two very different worlds. From the front, Hoa Hakananai'a (Chapter 70) proclaims with unshakable confidence the potency of ancestors who, properly venerated, will keep Easter Island safe. On his back, however, is sculpted the failure of that very cult and its later, anxious replacement by other rituals as the Easter Island ecosystem broke down and the birds essential to life on the island moved

away. The religious history of a community, lived out over centuries, is all legible in this one statue. The Russian Revolutionary plate (Chapter 96), by contrast, shows changes that were very much the consequence of human choice – and political calculation. The use of imperial porcelain to carry Bolshevik imagery has a beguiling irony about it; but that is rapidly overtaken by admiration for the unsentimental commercial brilliance which guessed correctly that capitalist collectors in the West would pay more for a plate if it combined the hammer and sickle of the Revolution with the imperial monogram of the Tsar. The plate shows the first steps in the complex historic compromise between the Soviets and the liberal democracies which would continue for the next seventy years.

These two reworkings both fascinate and instruct, but the refashioning which gives me the most pleasure is without doubt the Admonitions Scroll (Chapter 39). For hundreds of years, as it was slowly unrolled before them, owners and connoisseurs have taken delight in this celebrated masterpiece of Chinese painting, and have then recorded it by marking it with their seals. The result may alarm a western eye used to regarding the work of art as an almost sacred space, but there is I think something very moving about these acts of aesthetic witness which create a community of shared enjoyment spanning the centuries, and to which we in our turn may be admitted – even if we do not add our seals. There could be no clearer statement that this beautiful thing, which has charmed people in different ways over such a very long time, still has the power to delight and is now ours to enjoy.

There is another way in which the biographies of things change over time. One of the key tasks of museum scholarship, and above all of museum conservation science, is to keep returning to our objects, as new technologies allow us to ask new questions of them. The results, in recent years especially, have frequently been astonishing, opening up fresh lines of investigation and discovering unsuspected meanings in what we thought were familiar things. At the moment, objects are changing fast. The most striking instance in this book is surely the jade axe from Canterbury (Chapter 14), whose origin we can now trace to the very boulder from which it was originally chipped, high on a mountain in northern Italy. In consequence we have a new under-

standing of the trade routes of early Europe and a fresh set of hypotheses about the significance of the axe itself, especially valued, perhaps, because it came from above the clouds and far away. New methods of medical examination allow us intimate knowledge of the ailments of the ancient Egyptians (Chapter 1) and of the talismans they took with them into the afterlife. The medieval Hedwig beaker (Chapter 57), long famous for its ability to change water into wine, has also recently changed its own nature. Thanks to new analysis of the glass, it may now with some confidence be sourced to the eastern Mediterranean, and with less confidence (but great enjoyment) speculatively linked to a particular moment in medieval dynastic history and to a colourful character in the history of the Crusades. Science is rewriting these histories in totally unexpected ways.

Precise material science combines with powerful poetic imagining in the case of the Akan drum (Chapter 86), which was acquired for Sir Hans Sloane in Virginia around 1730. Wood and plant specialists have recently established that this drum was undoubtedly made in West Africa: it must have crossed the Atlantic on a slave ship. Now that we know its place of origin, it is impossible not to wonder what it may have witnessed, and not to accompany it, in imagination, on its journey from a West African royal court on the terrible Atlantic crossing to a North American plantation. We know that such drums were used to 'dance the slaves' on the ships to fight depression, and on the plantations sometimes rallied the slaves to revolt. If one of the purposes of an object history is to use things to give voice to the voiceless, then this slave drum has a special role – to speak for millions who were allowed to take nothing with them as they were enslaved and deported, and who were unable to write their own story.

## *Things across Time and Space*

Spinning the globe, trying to look at the whole world at roughly the same moment as I described in the preface, is not the way history is usually told or taught: I suspect that few of us in our schooldays were ever asked to consider what was happening in Japan or in East Africa in 1066. But if we do look across the globe at particular times, the

result is often surprising and challenging. Around AD 300 (Chapters 41–45), for example, with what seems like bewildering synchronicity, Buddhism, Hinduism and Christianity all moved towards the conventions of representation which broadly they still use today, and all of them began to focus on images of the human body. It is an astonishing co-incidence. Why? Were all three influenced by the enduring tradition of Hellenistic sculpture? Was it because they were all products of rich and expanding empires, able to invest heavily in the new pictorial language? Was there a new, shared idea that the human and the divine were in some sense inseparable? It is impossible to propose a conclusive answer, but only this way of looking at the world could so sharply pose what should be a central historical question.

In some instances, our history returns to more or less the same spot several times, at intervals of thousands of years, and observes the same phenomenon. But in these cases the similarities and coincidences are easier to explain. The sphinx of Taharqo (Chapter 22), the head of Augustus from Meroë (Chapter 35) and the slit drum from Khartoum (Chapter 94) all speak of violent conflict between Egypt and what is now Sudan. In each case, the people from the south – Sudan – enjoyed a moment (or a century) of victory; in each case, the power ruling in Egypt finally reasserted itself and the frontier was re-established. Pharaonic Egypt, the Rome of Augustus and the Britain of Queen Victoria were all in turn forced to recognize that around the first cataracts of the Nile, where the world of the Mediterranean meets black Africa, there is a secular geo-political fault line. There the tectonic plates have always collided, resulting in endemic conflict, whoever is in control. This is history that explains much about the politics of today.

Spinning the globe also, I think, shows how different history looks depending on who you are and where you are looking from. So although all the objects in the book are now in one place, it deliberately includes many different voices and perspectives. It draws on the expertise of the British Museum's combined team of curators, conservators and scientists, but it also presents research and analysis by leading scholars from all over the world, and includes assessments by people who deal professionally with objects similar to those discussed historically: the Head of the British Civil Service rates one of the oldest surviving Mesopotamian administrative records (Chapter 15), a

contemporary satirist looks at Reformation propaganda (Chapter 85) and an Indonesian puppet-master describes what is involved in such performances today (Chapter 83). With extraordinary generosity, judges and artists, Nobel Prize-winners and religious leaders, potters, sculptors and musicians have brought to the objects the insights of their professional experience.

Happily the book also includes voices from the communities or countries where the objects were made. This is, I believe, indispensable. Only they can explain what meanings these things now carry in that context: only a Hawaiian can say what significance the feather helmet given to Captain Cook and his colleagues (Chapter 87) has for the islanders today, after two hundred and fifty years of European and American intrusion. Nobody can explain better than Wole Soyinka what it means to a Nigerian now to see the Benin bronzes (Chapter 77) in the British Museum. These are crucial questions in any consideration of objects in history. All round the world national and communal identities are increasingly being defined through new readings of their history, and that history is frequently anchored in things. The British Museum is not just a collection of objects: it is an arena where meaning and identity are being debated and contested on a global scale, at times with acrimony. These debates are an essential part of what the objects now mean, as are the arguments about where they should properly be exhibited or housed. These views should be articulated by those most intimately concerned.

## *The Limits of Things*

All museums rest on the hope – the belief – that the study of things can lead to a truer understanding of the world. It is what the British Museum was set up to achieve. The idea was articulated powerfully by Sir Stamford Raffles, whose collection came to the British Museum as part of his campaign to persuade Europeans that Java had a culture which could proudly take its place beside the great civilizations of the Mediterranean. The head of the Buddha from Borobudur (Chapter 59) and the shadow-puppet of Bima (Chapter 83) show how eloquent objects can be in pleading such a cause, and I cannot be the only per-

son who looks at them and is totally persuaded by Raffles's argument. These two objects take us to very different moments of Java's history, demonstrating the culture's longevity and vitality, and they speak of two very different areas of human endeavour – a solitary spiritual quest for enlightenment, and riotous public fun. Through them, a whole culture can be glimpsed, apprehended and admired.

The object which perhaps best resumes the ambitions not just of this book but of the British Museum itself, the attempt to imagine and understand a world we have not experienced directly but know of only through the accounts and experiences of others, is Dürer's *Rhinoceros*, a beast which he drew but never saw. Confronted with reports of the Indian rhinoceros sent from Gujarat to the king of Portugal in 1515, Dürer informed himself as fully as he could from the written descriptions that had circulated around Europe and then tried to imagine what this extraordinary beast might look like. It is the same process that we all go through as we gather evidence, and then build our image of a world in the past or far away.

Dürer's animal, unforgettable in its pent-up monumentality and haunting in the rigid plates of its folding skin, is a magnificent achievement by a supreme artist. It is striking, evocative and so real you almost fear it is about to escape from the page. And it is, of course – exhilaratingly? distressingly? reassuringly? (I don't know which) – wrong. But in the end that is not the point. Durer's *Rhinoceros* stands as a monument to our endless curiosity about the world beyond our grasp, and to humanity's need to explore and try to understand it.