



Singularized Value and the Creation of a New Heirloom: A Case Study

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The world economic system is premised on the notion of fluctuations in value and capitalist societies have accepted the stock market as the appropriate indication of this phenomenon. Our acceptance of this daily variance in financial worth can be extended to fluctuations in the value of objects as well. To complicate matters, an object can be said to have exchange (monetary) value and singular (sentimental) value which are not always related. This paper charts the trajectory of an object from low exchange and low singular value to something so precious that it has earned the title of 'heirloom.' This paper attempts to explain how heirlooms have been created in the past and how this process could be replicated in the future through a case study approach.

The case-study is a partial and necessarily subjective approach which owes credit to Igor Kopytoff's *The Cultural Biography of Things: Commoditization as Process* (1986) and Marius Kwint's essay *The Physical Past in Material Memories* (1999). The account is partial because it details only the social biography and significance of the headwear although production processes are briefly described where they are important to the social life of this new heirloom. Kopytoff points out that we can accept that people will have multiple biographies such as social, professional, economic, and romantic thus the biographies of things must be similarly fragmented and partial (1986, p. 68). The account of the object therefore encompasses only its long life as an owned and rarely used accessory as it is this account which provides the data necessary to tackle the subject matter of accumulated singular value. The history of the object provided is also subjective and first-person language is used, this is the most relevant point of view from which to discuss the object at hand, and is supported by Kwint:

History, some argue, should fully admit to its illusory and constructed nature . . . For truer understanding of the significance and causality of the past we should reckon more with memory, embracing all its subjective viewpoints. . . (1999, pp. 1-2)

This is a valid method of analysis for this subject as the topic at hand is the accumulation of singular value. The value must therefore be discussed from a singular and in this case first-person perspective.

Kwint also importantly acknowledges the perceiver's affect on historical objects and refers to the "...proposition that human memory has undergone a mutual evolution with the

objects that inform it; that, in other words, the relationship between them is dialectical” (1999, p. 4). The objects of history and memory therefore act on individuals influentially in the same way that individuals act on the objects. To illustrate this in relation to singular value accumulation, the head-band given to me by my grandmother on a recent trip from Toronto Canada to London England, will be discussed as having been imbued with social significance disproportionate to its monetary worth by two women acting upon it. It has become a family heirloom, although it has passed hands only once to date and is worth little financially.

This object itself and the exchange between family members raises several interesting questions in relation to singular value: firstly, why was the object kept for so long despite its lack of continued use? What makes a head-ornament so special that is it subsequently catapulted into a new hierarchy of meaning and therefore worthy of retention spanning nearly half a century? How did this object acquire high singular value despite being of such low economic value? How is singular value acquired particularly by items of clothing? Finally, how has this item come to achieve the status of 'heirloom' in its singularity? This paper describes the head-band physically and then answers these questions by explaining why the head-band was kept but not worn for approximately 44 years and subsequently passed on to the eldest grand-daughter. This is followed by a brief explanation of the historical significance of hats in relation to singularized value which extends into a discussion of the exertion of power by the individual to singularize an item of clothing as a representation of the self as distinct from others. The head-band has overcome a low economic value and now participates within the higher value system of meaning due to its retention over several decades and the subsequent exchange with a family member. This paper also discusses the inherent symbolism of head-wear as a literal representation of power, and in turn the exertion of the individual's power to singularize an object. This act of singularizing is finally related to the efforts to distinguish an individual's identity as unique and valuable in relation to others as this effort is central to the creation of this new heirloom and establishing important but un-seen family bonds.

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