The Riddle of a Riddle

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Abstract

This paper examines the distinction made by Arthur C. Danto between artworks and what he terms "mere real things." It presents an eighteenth-century tool for sifting grain (a riddle) as a case study in the contexts of first, the house of its first known owner, General Artemas Ward (1727-1800); second, an exhibitioin 2006-7 drawn from the contents of that house pointedly held in an art museum; and, third, the likely maker of the object, a member of Hassanimisco Band of Nipmuc Indians. It examines the equivocal position of objects such as this in Danto's estimation, things that he considers to be "under contest," and asks whether the distinction between artworks and mere real things has any pertinence when artifacts can be used or regarded so variously in the course of their existence, whether as tools, symbols, artworks, or living beings.

Key Words

archaeology, artifact, artwork, basketry, convention, cosmogony, Danto, history, museum, symbol, tool

Work of art or mere real thing? Following Arthur Danto's lead in *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace*, this is a question we might ask of an object made of strips of wood, three-and-a-quarter inch deep, bent into a circle just over two feet in diameter with a course mesh of interwoven wood splints. It is an agricultural implement, a tool for sifting grain known as a riddle. It bears a stamp on its side, "AW" for Artemas Ward, the eighteenth-century militia officer, judge, and gentleman farmer from whose house in Shrewsbury, Massachusetts it comes. It was included in an exhibition, "'A Public Patriotic Museum': Artworks and Artifacts from the Artemas Ward House," at the Fogg Art Museum, Harvard University (October 14, 2006-February 11, 2007).[1]

Danto might term it an artifact, a human-made mere real thing. My collaborator, Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, and I contrived its display to invite attention to its aesthetic characteristics by showing it like a piece of sculpture, vertical in a case; but if we follow Danto, it remains on the face of it part of the Prose of the World, and not of Absolute Spirit, to use Hegel's terms cited by Danto.[2] For Danto such a thing is not and never can be an artwork. It does not compare or compete with philosophy in the articulation of ideas. It is not *about* anything. In *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace*, Danto argues that there is a strict boundary between artworks and mere real things. In his later discussion of African art, he carefully makes a case for extending this principle beyond the modern Euro-American art world with which he is so deeply familiar. He acknowledges that art can be produced within any society; yet he acknowledges that some material remains contested, so how important is it to decide what is art and what is not?

With this in mind, Ulrich and I pointedly held the exhibition in which the riddle appeared in an art museum. It concerns

General Artemas Ward, the first commander in the opening months of the War of Independence in 1775 of what was to become the Continental Army. Following his death in 1800, successive generations of his family remained in his house in Shrewsbury until a descendent bequeathed it to Harvard in 1925 as a memorial museum. Ward's female descendents were the ones who sought to preserve his memory by keeping and eventually labeling his personal possessions: books and inkwell, even his razor and strop, all treated with the gravity of relics. Their own handwork, transmitted from mother to daughter or aunt to niece, became in turn relics of their own efforts of commemoration. This transmission reveals an alternative genealogy: one of sentiment following female lines of descent that complements that of real property and masculine public reputation entrusted to male primogeniture. By juxtaposing relics associated with Artemas Ward with the more private productions of his female descendents, Ulrich and I hoped to bring that female genealogy of sentiment out from beneath Ward's shadow and to reveal an aspect of women's roles in the creation of family, local, and even national mythology. We also hoped to show that aesthetic considerations played an important role in the decisions women—and others—made.[3]

The objects we selected were varied. They included artifacts that none would gainsay as artworks, such as Raphaelle Peale's 1793 oil portrait of Artemas Ward,[4] and objects that could enjoy a place within an art museum's decorative arts collection, such as General Ward's Windsor writing chair.[5] Costume, too, has long been included among the decorative arts, so General Ward's cloak is fully qualified for exhibition in an art museum—as are the two quilts we chose.[6] Quilts, though, continue to occupy an equivocal position, and some might seek to relegate them to the realm of craft or of amateur work along with a family register in the form of a hair-work flower bouquet.[7] Other objects, like Artemas Ward's snowshoes, may be no one's works of art, but rather purely functional artifacts.[8] While some of these may at first glance not qualify as art, and, admittedly, by Danto's criteria perhaps never qualify as art, others are clearly what he describes when mentioning "wrought-iron work from medieval Spain, for example, or swords and halberds from Nuremberg" as "under contest."[9] Although such things are to be found in many European and North American art museums, according to Danto they "may forever be but high-class artifacts";[10] "may" sounding an honest note of equivocation. Before exploring why such equivocation is fully warranted, let us look at the uses to which historians put material objects.

While most historians set the greatest store by written documents, few would disagree that any object with a past might disclose aspects of that past, if they could but discover adequate means of addressing it. Material objects, then, have a role to play in the writing of history. One of the great values of *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace* is that Danto demonstrates with great clarity and wit that artworks, at least, have immaterial as well as material constituents. Historians should take both into account if they are to succeed in interpreting material objects adequately.

Archaeology has become increasingly important to historians

who study eras and areas affected by a paucity of documentation. Equally importantly, archaeological research has radically complemented and revised accounts of societies with rich written records.[11] The early history of colonial North America is a striking example.[12] The incorporation of archaeological information within history as an important modifier and complement has strengthened a radical change in the conception of cultures. Whereas until recently many believed that cultures without writing were necessarily cultures without history, the successful exploitation of material remains (and, of equal importance, oral tradition) has encouraged recognition that all peoples have histories, regardless of their technologies. Just as an increased mingling of history and archaeology has helped to prompt this conceptual change, so has an equally far-reaching mingling of history and anthropology. Epistemological and technological change may occur at different rates in different societies and at rates that vary over time within any society, but the human past is never static. All peoples have pasts, and all pasts entail change; therefore all peoples can have histories, if only historians could find the source material and persuasive means of using it to make those histories.

This release from a view that allowed historical initiative only to some self-proclaimed high cultures while withholding it from others can be viewed as part of a postcolonial epistemic shift. It means that peoples previously denied even the possibility of histories within the terms of the dominant culture can see their claims upon their pasts accepted, or at least acquiesced in, within those terms. (However, this is not to claim that there are no radical disagreements over interpretation.) This development has had a momentous effect on the study of vast areas and chronologies and led to detailed reassessments of relations in recent centuries between colonized peoples and colonizers. For example, combinations of archaeological, ethnological, and folkloric studies of material objects, in conjunction with closer attention than had previously been given to aspects of documents and other texts, has led to a recognition within the dominant culture that Native Americans are as possessed of histories as are the colonists who decimated, displaced, and confined them.[13]

The use of material objects by historians is not confined to the archaeological record. They can appeal to objects otherwise studied in terms of anthropology, folklore, antiquarianism, and art history. What matters, in broad terms, do historians address by considering such things? The matters at issue are human beings' changing relationships with things themselves through making and use, and with one another by means of the things they make and use. The range of material is wide indeed. Defining it entails making taxonomic distinctions.

In the first instance, we can distinguish between things considered within Western culture to be material alone in the sense of being independent of human design—broadly speaking, nature—and things that have both material and immaterial components in terms of human design, which are things in culture. These correspond, though not necessarily without qualification, to the natural and the artificial, things in nature and things in culture. The distinction between what can be said to lie within the realm of human artifice and what

remains in nature is far from clear-cut, as human intervention in nature takes many forms.[14] In an era of genetic engineering and the patenting of life forms, we may wonder whether we can still justifiably isolate what is wholly human-made and artificial, but let us attempt to do so, even though such things may be defined by no clear boundary, and term things fashioned by, or designated and modified by human agency, *artifacts*.

Artifacts are very varied. They range from objects considered by many to be among the most sophisticated and culturally valuable artworks that represent human thought at its most profound to the smallest everyday thing,: from paintings by Poussin to pincushions. That this range seems so great itself implies a number of questions for historians who would address objects that fall within it.

When in pursuit of profound and subtle human thinking, the claims of artworks might appear to be self-evident, however varied the range of human thought they represent culturally and chronologically. We readily acknowledge that an artwork is an embodiment or expression of complex abstract thinking, partly, perhaps, original to the artist, but comprehensible to a greater or lesser extent by the artist's contemporaries owing to adherence to a shared set of conventions. A tendency persists among Westerners to acknowledge this as applying less problematically to artworks culturally familiar to them than to others. Nonetheless, few would seriously claim that a thirteenth-century Indian bronze statue of *Rama* expounds complex religious ideas any less sophisticatedly than does a contemporary Sienese gable sculpture of *Christ Blessing*. Both are products of societies that until not long ago were among those described as civilizations to distinguish them from others regarded by Westerners, and some others, as of lesser worth. Many now would be embarrassed to claim that either of these objects is any more culturally sophisticated than the products of what were once seen as inferior cultures. For example, few would claim that a granary door from the Dogon people in Mali or a Chilkat blanket from the Tlingit people of the Pacific North-West represent abstract ideas any less complex than the Indian statue or the Sienese sculpture. All such things, from whatever society or time, that embody or express ideas—or "aboutness" in Danto's formulation—even if that aboutness concerns the object's own form or status, are amenable to being treated as artworks.

As we have seen, Danto draws a distinction between artworks, which possess aboutness, and "mere real things," which, while also artifacts, do not.[15] This is not to claim that aboutness is the criterion according to which one can invariably distinguish artworks from other artifacts. The objects in the Ward exhibition no less than my four further examples, though, suggest that any boundary between artworks and other artifacts is likely to be porous. The Ward examples being, on the face of it, Western suggest that this porosity is not an effect of cultural diversity. All the objects I have mentioned have a non-art use: the Peale portrait of Ward promotes his social status; the hair-work register places fragments of family members in demonstrative relation to one another; the Rama and the Christ serve as devotional objects; the Dogon door is both a practical fixture and an intermediary between the

material and immaterial worlds; and the Chilkat blanket is similarly a ritual mediator. To use a thing as an artwork (allowing this to be an expression to which Danto might object, for to him a thing either is or is not an artwork) does not preclude using it in other manners too, though some or even all of those other uses—commemoration, devotion, ritual, boundary definition—may draw upon those qualities that also qualify that thing for use as an artwork; that is, the aesthetic qualities of an object can enhance its efficacy in the variety of uses to which it is put.

Danto points out that the degree of detachment supposed by Immanuel Kant's criteria of disinterest and purposiveness without purpose for the artwork only obtains in special periods of art history (and, we should add, in certain cultures).[16] He also argues that it is possible to "suspend practicality, to stand back and assume a detached view of the object, see its shapes and colors, enjoy and admire it for what it is, subtracting all considerations of utility."[17] That is, any object can be used as an artwork, but so doing does not in itself make it one. As he puts it, "it is possible to see the whole world across aesthetic distance . . . [b]ut *just for this reason* we cannot explicate the connection between artworks and reality on the basis of this distinction" (original emphasis).[18] The consequence of these observations and of a desire not to limit aesthetic attention to artworks produced as such within certain cultures during limited periods might lead some to set aside as impracticable any ambition to define art comprehensively and to prefer the possible errors and absurdities that follow from regarding and using any object aesthetically. Even if some, like me, choose this course, nonetheless, insofar as we continue to draw a distinction in practice between artworks as such and Danto's mere real things, we should be grateful to Danto for helping us to recognize that we can choose otherwise. That is, we could choose to describe the artwork as the product of more or less profound abstract thinking which careful perusal or scholarly explication can reveal, in contradistinction to the mere real thing that, while perhaps the product of considerable ingenuity, neither embodies nor expresses profound qualities or the inventiveness of its maker.

On this view, the everyday object is the lesser thing and, by implication, should be excluded as far as possible from institutions such as art museums in favor of artworks. We would do this by distinguishing between artworks and mere real things by first, seeking to account for the conventions according to which they first operated—the embodiment or expression of abstract ideas and values recognizable by both makers and initial users—in both categories. The mere real thing is exhausted once the observer has identified conformity to these conventions. The artwork, on the other hand, manifests what we might term a surplus; that is, characteristics that are the result of the maker's calculated modification or even pointed flouting of those conventions. These can be material or immaterial (for instance, an act of titling), but in either case the surplus—the art—consists in the purposive deviation from an initial user's expectations. Western thought has long valued this characteristic as originality, but other cultures, however conservative in their adherence to familiar forms, similarly value highly subtle

manifestations of adaptability and modification, though not necessarily with the same emphasis on solipsism that characterizes the Western attitude. The artwork, then, has qualities that cause it to be unique in this sense of deviation from a norm within a set of conventions, as opposed to being no more than an articulation of such a set of conventions, and therefore simply representative of them.

Yet we should pause to consider those highly subtle manifestations of adaptability and modification that might characterize some non-Western (and even some Western) things. Is this a consideration confined to artworks? Do sets of conventions governing the ideas associated with artifacts that are not artworks remain unchanging? Are they not subject to inventive modification no less than is manifest in acknowledged artworks? May not those changes be either less recognizable to Western eyes and minds than those in acknowledged artworks, or incremental in subtle ways? We should recall with some urgency that, as the anthropologist Germaine Dieterlen long ago observed, "The smallest everyday object may reveal in its form or decoration a conscious reflection of a complex cosmogony."[19] An artifact can purposefully have a place in a system of thought familiar to its maker and early users to which even a relatively careful observer may be oblivious, whether through inattention to the possible significance of its material characteristics or ignorance of its immaterial associations for its original constituency. Furthermore, the smallest everyday object can also embody or reveal the traces of certain of that constituency's assumptions that are not purposefully articulated by its maker, but that reveal themselves in inadvertent traces of use that imply routines of everyday life constitutive, as Michel de Certeau argued, of cultural values.[20] Such routines can leave their inadvertent traces on artifacts themselves, such as patterns of wear: the abrasion of the abrasion of the foot of Daniel Chester French's statue of John Harvard in Harvard yard where visitors repeatedly touch it, like pilgrims who kiss the statue of *St. Peter Enthroned* in his Roman basilica.

In many instances when archaeology is the principle means of investigation, the corollary evidence of contemporary testimony that might explain both deliberate and inadvertent characteristics simply does not exist. Sometimes analogies can be drawn by comparison with related, often later, material. Thus, in order to account for the incised of dots and lines on the edges of a nineteenth-century antler awl handle excavated at a Wahpeton Dakota village in Minnesota, archaeologist Janet Spector appealed to oral information concerning the conventions according to which women kept count of the hides and tipis they had prepared by a tally system on their hide-working tools.[21] Furthermore, although these marks may appear to be purely functional, we should not assume as much without due cause; rather we should at least consider the possibility that they may approach or conform to the kind of marks to which we saw Dieterlen drawing attention as "a conscious reflection of a complex cosmogony." Furthermore, this occurrence was not a natural phenomenon, but a cultural contrivance with a history, could we but discover it. Someone invented the notation, and its mode and significance may have changed deliberately over time.

That an artifact is "a conscious reflection of a complex cosmogony" is not sufficient for it to be an artwork in Danto's sense, though for the historian this would seem to be one of its most interesting and useful possible qualities. We are not always in a position readily to recognize those immaterial constituents that might have led such a thing to be what it was to its makers and first users. Sometimes makers and first users can be at cross purposes. Take Artemas Ward's riddle. On the face of it this ordinary tool is part of the Prose of the World. In part to stress the role that aesthetic response can play in historical scholarship, we have contrived to present it in terms Danto describes so well when he argues that we can choose to regard anything from an aesthetic viewpoint.[22] Regardless of the aestheticizing effect of museum placement and lighting, the grain riddle is an object of considerable formal beauty, and struck Laurel Ulrich and me as such when we came across it among many other mere real things at the Ward house. This might be enough to warrant the treatment we gave it in the exhibition, yet the case is more complex. It may have been an unremarkable tool to Artemas Ward and his farm workers in the mid-eighteenth century; but, like his snowshoes, it was in all likelihood made by a member of a local band of Hassanamisco Indians with which Ward had an administrative relationship.[23] Indian basketry, of which this riddle is likely an easily overlooked example, rarely simply serves a practical function; its materials and mode of making usually carry cosmological associations so that such an object most likely epitomized aspects of its maker's ideas about the world. While an object made by an Indian for white people's use may not be so profoundly imbued with the quality of a living being as one made for and used by an indigenous community, it can nonetheless partake of that quality.[24] The riddle of the riddle therefore, is far more complex than we might initially have supposed. I, for one, propose to respect its complexity, its propensity to be more than one thing: tool and symbol, and, for all I know, artwork and living being. No object reveals all of itself in any one circumstance, and the changes among its aspects are a matter of history.

The historian Randolph Starn makes the point that "all museums are in some sense historical."[25] This is indeed a key aspect of their interest and utility. However, there would seem to be at least two further reasons to be interested in them. First, they propose taxonomies of the world, hence are philosophical instruments; and second, they allow or in some cases encourage aesthetic engagement with their contents. To my way of thinking, philosophical, aesthetic, and historical engagement are inseparably complementary. This is why I attend to and greatly value Arthur Danto's arguments in *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace* regarding the peculiarity of artworks. There are good reasons always to acknowledge first, the character of our taxonomies of objects, and second, our propensity to make aesthetic judgments about all those things from which we would make history. As one of the proverbial sayings inscribed on the quilt by its maker, Artemas Ward's granddaughter, Sarah Putnam, has it: "Where you can't unriddle learn to trust."[26]

Endnotes

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[1] Grain riddle, eighteenth-century, wood with woven splints, diameter 62.2 cm., depth 8.3 cm., General Artemas Ward Museum, Shrewsbury, MA (henceforth GAWM), inventory no. HU 3393: Ivan Gaskell and Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, *"A Public Patriotic Museum": Artworks and Artifacts from the General Artemas Ward House (Harvard University Art Museums Gallery Series 53*; Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Art Museums, 2006), p. 8.

[2] Danto, Arthur C., "Art and Artifact in Africa," in *Beyond the Brillo Box: The Visual Arts in Post-Historical Perspective* (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1992), p. 96, discussing an object with which the riddle might broadly be compared, a Zande hunting net; first published in *Art/artifact: African Art in Anthropology Collections*, (New York and Munich: Center for African Art and Prestel Verlag, 1988).

[3] Gaskell and Ulrich, *"A Public Patriotic Museum,"* pp. 2-6.

[4] Oil on canvas, 72.4 x 61.8 cm., GAWM, inventory no. HU 1661.

[5] Late eighteenth-century, height 105.7 cm., GAWM, inventory no. HU 1495.

[6] General Ward's cloak, late eighteenth-century, wool broadcloth, length 137.2 cm., GAWM, inventory no. HU 4001; quilt, feathered vine pattern, c. 1810-1840, wool worsted dyed with indigo (front), 226 x 227.7 cm., GAWM, inventory no. HU 1839; pieced quilt with inscriptions, 1881, by Sarah Henshaw Ward Putnam, mixed fabrics, ink, 198.1 x 208.3 cm., GAWM, inventory no. HU 3681. On the introduction of quilts into art museums, see Janet Catherine Berlo and Patricia Cox Crews, *Wild by Design: Two Hundred Years of Innovation and Artistry in American Quilts* (Lincoln and Seattle: International Quilt Study Center at the University of Nebraska, Lincoln and University of Washington Press, 2003). For New England, see Lynne Z. Bassett and Jack Larkin, *Northern Comfort: New England's Early Quilts, 1780–1850 from the Collection of Old Sturbridge Village* (Nashville: Rutledge Hill Press, 1998); see also Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, *The Age of Homespun: Objects and Stories in the Creation of an American Myth* (New York: Knopf, 2001), especially pp. 208–47, 277–339. For theory, see Judy Elsley, *Quilts as Text(iles): The Semiotics of Quilting* (New York: Peter Lang, 1996).

[7] C. 1850-70, human hair, wire, 49.2 x 45.1 x 9.5 cm., GAWM, inventory no. HU 1560.

[8] 1768 or before, wood, leather, 91.4 x 42 cm., GAWM, inventory no. HU 1574 a-b.

[9] Danto, "Art and Artifact in Africa," p. 99.

[10] Danto, "Art and Artifact in Africa," p. 99.

[11] For an important consideration of philosophical issues in respect of archaeological practice, see Alison Wylie, *Thinking from Things: Essays in the Philosophy of Archaeology* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002).

[12] The founding historical text is James Deetz, *In Small Things Forgotten: The Archaeology of Early American Life* (Garden City, NY: Anchor/Doubleday, 1977; revised and expanded edition, New York: Anchor/Doubleday, 1996).

[13] For example, Howard S. Russell, *Indian New England Before the Mayflower* (Hanover, NH and London: University Press of New England, 1980), and Daniel K. Richter, *Facing East from Indian Country: A Native History of Early America* (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 2001).

[14] See Keith Thomas, *Man and the Natural World: Changing Attitudes in England, 1500-1800* (London: Allen Lane, 1983).

[15] Danto, Arthur C., *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace: A Philosophy of Art* (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 1981), p. 3: "But neither . . . is that red expanse [a primed canvas] . . . about anything, but that is because it is a thing, and things, as a class, lack aboutness just because they are things." See also pp. 81, 84-85.

[16] Danto, *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace*, p. 23.

[17] Danto, *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace*, p. 22.

[18] Danto, *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace*, p. 22.

[19] Germaine Dieterlen, "Introduction" in Marcel Griaule, *Conversations with Ogotemmêli: An Introduction to Dogon Religious Ideas* (London: Oxford University Press for the International African Institute, 1965; first published as *Dieu d'Eau: entretiens avec Ogotemmêli,* Paris: Editions du Chêne, 1948), p. xiv.

[20] Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Rendall (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 1984; first published as *L'Invention du quotidien 1: Arts de faire*, Paris: Gallimard, 1974).

[21] Spector, Janet D., *What This Awl Means: Feminist Archaeology at a Wahpeton Dakota Village* (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 1993), pp. 36-39, citing Alanson B. Skinner, *Medicine Ceremony of the Menomini, Iowa, and Wahpeton Dakota, with Notes on the Ceremony among the Ponca, Bungi Ojibwa, and Potawatomi* (*Indian Notes and Monographs* 4; New York: Museum of the American Indian, Heye Foundation, 1920), p. 167; Royal B. Hassrick, *The Sioux: Life and Customs of a Warrior Society* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1964), pp. xiii, 42-43, and Elijah Black Thunder, et al., *Ehanna woyakapi: History and Culture of the Sisseton-Wahpeton Sioux Tribe of South-Dakota* (Sisseton: Sisseton-Wahpeton Tribe, 1975), p. 106.

[22] Danto, "Art and Artifact in Africa," p. 94.

[23] The Hassanamisco band is associated with the contemporary Nipmuc Nation. Ward was one of three white

guardians of the Hassanamisco Indians appointed by the General Court of Massachusetts in 1762: see Stephen J. Reno in collaboration with Zara CiscoeBrough, *A History of the Nipmuc Indians of Central Massachusetts* (typescript prepared under the direction and with the permission of the Nipmuc Tribal Council, Hassanamisco and Chaubunagungamaug bands, 1984, Tozzer Library, Harvard University). Ward's snowshoes are stylistically similar to others identified as Nipmuc: Daniel Sutherland Davidson, *Snowshoes* (*Memoirs of the American Philosophical Society* 6; Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society, 1937). I am indebted to Sarah Carter for research on Ward's snowshoes.

[24] See, for example, Marvin Cohodas, *Basket Weavers for the Curio Trade: Elizabeth and Louise Hickox*(Tuscon: University of Arizona Press, 1997), pp. xiii-xvi.

[25] Randolph Starn, "A Historian's Brief Guide to New Museum Studies," *American Historical Review* 110, 2005, 68.

[26] GAWM, inventory no. HU 3681: see n. 6 above.

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