The Practical and the Sentimental: The Artifact Collection of The Danish Immigrant Museum

Angela Stanford

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Many of the things immigrants brought from Denmark were of practical value to them as travelers building new lives across the ocean. Trunks, blankets, tools, and clothes were obvious choices for anyone moving from one place to another. Photographs, knick-knacks, toys, and other like items may not have been as practical, but held sentimental value by reminding them of the homes, families, and friends they were leaving behind.

A number of these items, both practical and sentimental, are part of the collection held by The Danish Immigrant Museum in Elk Horn, Iowa. Since 1985, we have been collecting these treasures and have built a substantial collection estimated to number about 40,000 items. Our artifacts span many generations, innumerable miles, and all object types ranging from amber jewelry to copper teapots to handmade violins to wedding clothing. While many of the items housed in the museum came to this country by way of their Danish
immigrant owners, many others originated in the United States and were made or purchased by immigrants or their descendants.

The artifacts that arrived in the United States in immigrant hands are primarily represented in our collection by way of trunks, tools, clothing, photographs, and books. Other items such as figurines, textiles like bedding and clothing, and jewelry are less common, but also find places within our museum. A large part of our collection, though, speaks to the way immigrants and their families made lives for themselves in their new homes. Handmade wood and metal working tools, household furnishings like lamps, and furniture, both purchased and handmade, are all examples of immigrants' desire to fit in and the ways they succeeded in doing so. Many immigrants continued to maintain close ties to Denmark and our collection also reflects this trend through the several hundred commemorative Christmas plates from Royal Copenhagen and Bing & Grøndahl, as well as family photos, postcards, and newspapers from "home."

How we have built such a vast collection
The strength of our collection is due in very large measure to the generosity of our donors. Since 1985, when the museum first opened with displays for the public to enjoy, we have received donations from almost 2,400 donors from all over the United States and at least seven different countries including Denmark. Many of these donors are frequent givers, some offering as many as a dozen separate gift lots over the last twenty-two years.

Many, though certainly not all, of our donors tend to be elderly and are passing along keepsakes which belonged to their parents or grandparents who immigrated. Many others are given by young families wishing to honor their ancestors. A large number of the artifacts our donors give come with invaluable histories and documentation which make the artifacts more valuable historically, and allow us the opportunity to build stronger, more comprehensive exhibits and programs.

The artifacts offered to The Danish Immigrant Museum are often highly valued by the donors who make them available to us. They have been part of their families, part of their personal histories, and donors want to know that these items will be preserved for
generations to come and will be used to tell the story of their Danish ancestors. Dozens of families are represented in our collection, and the artifacts we have help to tell stories about immigrant beginnings and the Danish American lives established since.

**Specific artifacts found in our collection**

So many of our artifacts are historically valuable and we are very fortunate to have them. A few items are of particular note. Victor Borge's first concert piano is prominently displayed in our permanent exhibit, and a few of his performance outfits have been used in rotating exhibits. A huge altar, two chancel chairs, and a podium all carved by Jes Smidt, who emigrated from Denmark in 1883, have a striking presence near our front entrance. In 1995, the Morning Star Chapel was donated by a couple in Cedar Falls, Iowa, and moved to the museum grounds. It has since been host to a handful of weddings and, just recently, a baptism. Another structure donated to the museum was the Jens Dixen House, a Danish immigrant homesteader's shanty built in Kenmare, North Dakota, and moved to the museum.
grounds in 1999. In 2006, an archival gift chronicling Roxy Clay Works of Kimballton, Iowa, a business we previously had little information about, was donated by a family from Eureka, Missouri. Also in 2006, we received a stone ax and flint knife dating from the Stone Age and found in Jutland. Our donors are very generous.

One of the most significant contemporary gifts from an individual was the collection of twenty-five photographs taken by Danish-born photographer Sisse Brimberg, who has been a photographer with *National Geographic* since 1976. She has been published within the pages of *National Geographic* on numerous occasions, and has received many awards and recognitions for her work. This set of photos first came to the museum in 2002 for an exhibition, and after being displayed here, they traveled to other museums. Ms. Brimberg made the decision to donate them to us, and they became part of the permanent collection in 2006, much to the delight of everyone at the museum.

The donations we have received over our twenty-two-year history have come not only from individuals and families, but also from organizations. One of the largest collections we have is from the Danish Brotherhood in America. Some of the DBIA items we have include recognition certificates and plaques, individual Lodge seals, commemorative plates, photographs of most of the annual...
conventions held around the country, and booklets outlining by-laws, constitutions, and various Brotherhood rituals and procedures. Many of these items came in one large gift in 1994, but dozens of individual Lodges have contributed as well.

**Timeline of our collection**

As is the case with many museums, the majority of our collection dates prior to World War II. "Modern" artifacts tend to be underrepresented and much more difficult to find in museums across the country and The Danish Immigrant Museum is no different. Though we have thousands of artifacts ranging from commemorative plates to photographic postcards to wedding dresses and more, the vast majority of our holdings, in both our permanent and in-use divisions, are pre-World War II. We are therefore unable to exhibit more recent generations as comprehensively as earlier ones.

We are trying to collect artifacts from recent generations so that we may preserve that history now while the opportunity exists. Though it is difficult for people to think of contemporary things like childhood toys, clothes, photographs, homemade tools and decorations, household appliances, and military-related materials as artifacts appropriate for a museum, all of those items, and more dating from the 1940s through today, are historically valuable. If artifacts from these generations are not collected now, they may be lost or discarded. In this throw-away society, it is more and more important to cultivate these generations and make sure they are represented in museums in the future. At The Danish Immigrant Museum, we strive to tell the complete story of Danish immigrants and their descendents. Immigration continues today and we need the artifacts to illustrate those stories and experiences. Incorporating more modern artifacts into exhibits will also help attract a younger generation of museum visitor, which will make this museum a viable and necessary part of many more generations.

**Tracking our collection**

In the mid-1990s, the museum purchased a collections software system called "PastPerfect." This program is used internationally
and has become one of the most widely-used systems on the market for museums. PastPerfect allows museums to keep electronic records of all artifacts in their collections and those being loaned. It maintains the names and contact information of donors and lenders, the physical locations of all artifacts, and any and all known documentation and family associations related to each piece. Within the individual record for each artifact is space for a detailed description, measurements, and a strict condition report in which even the slightest scratch or chip is noted. The system also allows the user to attach images so that there is a visual record to coincide with all cataloged pieces.

Since PastPerfect was purchased and staff members were adequately trained in its use, all donations have been entered into the system under one of four catalog areas: objects, archives, photos, and library. The majority of our collection falls under the object category which includes three-dimensional items like tools, clothing, and dishes. The next largest category for us is archives, which includes all paper materials like correspondence, certificates, and scrapbooks. All original photos, negatives, and photo albums fall under the photo category, and all books and some booklets are cataloged under library.

PastPerfect allows the user to search all records contained within each of the four categories. If a family comes to the museum and asks to see the trunk donated by their grandfather, we can search the system using the name of the donor or simply by using the word “trunk.” The record will contain the location code for that specific piece, making it possible for staff to retrieve the trunk and allow the family an opportunity to see it.

Striving for complete, accurate inventories and records
Earlier, I shared that we estimate the size of our collection to be around 40,000 artifacts. This count includes both the permanent collection and the collection we refer to as in-use. The latter are those artifacts that people can handle and use, those that do not require the same environmental monitoring, and are generally allowed to “live out their lives” as their creators intended.
We currently do not have an exact artifact count due to three different factors. First of all, most of our paper artifact records dating prior to the mid-1990s and prior to the purchase of PastPerfect have not yet been entered into the system. This means that most of the information we have on those fifteen years of donations is still in paper form and is, therefore, not easily searchable. While we have donation paperwork which provides counts and brief descriptions of the most of artifacts given in those early years, and we now have electronic listings of all of our donors and the identification numbers assigned to their donations, we must manually open each file and count the items listed in order to gain an estimate of the size of our collection. We have been going file by file and entering information into the system, but it is a very time consuming process. Progress is being made and will continue until all paper files are in PastPerfect.

Secondly, we have never conducted a full inventory. Spot checks of some of our storage cabinets and shelves have been done throughout the last several years, but a complete process that includes every single artifact throughout the entire building, as well as off-site storage, has never taken place. In November of 2006, we began this enormously daunting task. As we go shelf by shelf in our Visual Storage area, we are recording brief descriptions, detailed condition reports, and the locations for all artifacts we find, and are also taking photographs of them. Once we complete a shelf, we go back to the computer and enter all of the information we have for that object. If the objects on our inventory list are older and have not yet been entered into PastPerfect, we pull the paper file and add it at this time. By the time a unit is finished being inventoried all known information, including photographs, will be in PastPerfect and will be searchable. This will not only help us establish accurate artifact counts, but will also verify location records and fill in gaps so that if a donor visits the museum and asks to see something he or she donated 10 years ago, we will be able to search the system and find that artifact.

Finally, there are almost 400 donations currently waiting to be reviewed and added to our collection. These donations are part of the backlog which resulted from changes taking place within the
department a number of years ago, as well as from receiving such a large number of donations that the department could not keep up. The artifacts within these gifts have not been reviewed to determine if they would be appropriate for our collection or not, and while we have lists which briefly record what each gift contains, those lists are often not as inclusive and detailed as they need to be in order to give an accurate count. Tremendous progress has already been made in reducing this backlog. Each month, our Collections Review Committee reviews about a dozen older gifts to determine if they are appropriate for our collection. We have completed three of the seven backlogged years, and will soon be starting on the fourth.

In conclusion
Maintaining an artifact collection requires a great deal of time, attention to detail, and the care and concern of all museum staff. Everyone has to (and does) value the collection and understand that the artifacts we house are really held in trust for the public. We strive to preserve all of our artifacts according to established professional standards so that generations to come can learn from them, and so that they can see the things that their immigrant ancestors valued enough to bring with them as they traveled such a great distance. Connections can be made between the past and present by bringing to life and sharing those stories connected to these artifacts. We are very fortunate to have been able to build such a strong collection. We have a very bright future ahead of us, one filled with the personal stories and family connections to the artifacts that serve as the tangible reminders of the past.