

The Presence, Provenance and Presentness of a Non Artifact¹

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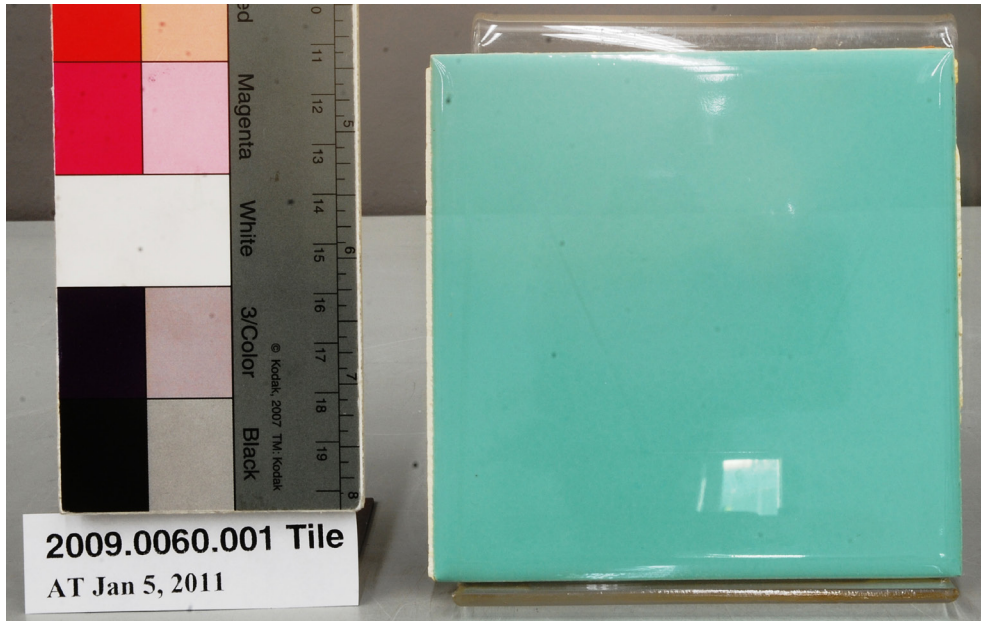


Figure 1. Green tile in the collections of Ingenium: Canada's Museums of Science and Innovation. 10.9 by 10.9 cm. Image courtesy of Ingenium: Canada's Museums of Science and Innovation, artifact no. 2009.0060.

Presence

There are many properties of things within the simplest of artifacts in museums. The green tile pictured above features several distinctive sensory qualities - the sea-foam green, glassy smooth glaze, the rough backside where it was once on a wall, the ceramic sound produced by tapping, and the distinctive plaster smell on the back side. Each of these qualities takes us into different aspects of this object's history - the manufacture, installation, and the experiences associated with its different lives in factories, hospitals and museums. While at first glance a mundane object, with a little consideration of its aesthetic properties it becomes a small object with a surprisingly strong presence.

Taken seriously on their own terms, the basic sensory features of such an object provide powerful resources for questions, research and exhibits. In the spirit of some of the challenges of the *On the Properties of Things* conference, I ask how we could amplify or communicate these features in exhibitions and displays, and how our display choices could reflect different ways of experiencing and learning from the object. For example, how would we display such a tile in different thematic, disciplinary, or even museum contexts - would it fit in exhibitions about design, ceramics or medicine?



Figure 2. Green tiles, front and back. There are thirty-six glazed green tiles preserved in storage at Ingenium. They each measure 10.9 by 10.9 cm. Image courtesy of Ingenium: Canada's Museums of Science and Innovation, artifact no. 2009.0060.



Figure 3. Theratron Junior, 1956. Atomic Energy Canada Ltd. Image courtesy of Ingenium: Canada's Museums of Science and Innovation, artifact no. 1966.0043.

The four tiles pictured above have already been displayed in an exhibition at the Canada Science and Technology Museum called *The Colour of Medicine*, on the historic and cultural role of the colour of green in medicine, which is an interesting story in its own right. Surgeons first used green in the surgical theatre in the 1910s. Amidst the glare of new electric lighting, spinach green served as a colour complement to hemoglobin red, thus making it easier for surgeons to see details during surgery. In the 1930s, Madison Avenue colour consultants started to use green to paint the hospital and institutional landscape of North America, and elsewhere. By the 1950s, this movement had become an aesthetic expectation, and the expectation was so strong that when Saskatchewan neurosurgeon William Feindel wanted to install viewing screens in his new surgical theatre at the University Hospital in Saskatoon, he

was told that such a change would alter the beautiful array of green tiles in that room. Design considerations had taken precedence over the original function of green (Pantalony 2009).

The pure sensory feature of green in these tiles inspires a line of questioning into an over-looked dimension of medical culture. Whereas hospitals used green for surgical theatres, overall design and patient experience, companies such as Atomic Energy Canada Ltd used the specific 'Sea Foam Green' from the Canadian decorative paint company CIL to brand their products in the post-WWII commercial landscape. At world fairs from the 1950s to 1970s, green was the colour of Canada as an Atomic player on the world stage (Pantalony 2011).

Provenance

The tiles have evocative and immediate sensory qualities, but they also have unique and very local object histories. In museums we call this provenance or the succession of ownership. But there is more to provenance than the practical and legal tracing of who once owned something - each object has biographical qualities with great potential for research and alternative storytelling in the museum context (Alberti 2005; Kopytoff 1986; Pantalony 2017). These green tiles came from a tiled wall within the historic Weyburn Psychiatric Hospital in Saskatchewan, where the colour served a specific purpose: to calm patients. The Weyburn Hospital is perhaps most infamous as the place where Humphry Osmond clinically tested LSD for the first time in the 1950s (Dyck 2012). The tiles may have represented modern ideals in mental hospital care, but the reality was quite different. The Weyburn was a site of considerable trauma for the many of its patients (Dyck and Deighton 2017). In 2008, in the midst of the demolition of that building, the Museum of Science and Technology acquired these tiles in order to preserve all these dimensions of the hospital's history.



Figure 4. Green tiles in Weyburn Hospital (now demolished), photograph by Ann De Mey, 2008. Image courtesy of Ingenium: Canada's Museums of Science and Innovation, artifact no. 2009.0060

The plaster on the back, therefore, has a very local history of labour and installation. Workers installed those tiles as part of a major renovation at the Weyburn in the early 1960s. We often focus on the doctors and patients in these histories, but we also should look at other dimensions of these spaces. What were the experiences of every kind of worker at the Weyburn, and the impact on the local community? What were the costs that went into such a renovation? What was the cost specifically behind this fashionable fascination with medical green? The plaster is a tangible reminder of the many other human dimensions, such as the social and economic dimensions of this history.



Figure 5. Crown label on back of tile discovered in our conservation labs (image of pencil rubbing on left to show 'Crown' and 'Japan' more clearly). Image courtesy of Ingenium: Canada's Museums of Science and Innovation, artifact no. 2009.0060.

There is also an international dimension to these tiles at the Weyburn: they were made in Japan by a ceramic company called 'Crown'. One of my colleagues in conservation discovered this almost-hidden feature during a careful examination in our conservation labs. This industrial label brings us into another human aspect of the tile's history - Japanese workers at a particular factory made hundreds of these tiles for circulation around the world. The tiles presumably went into kitchens, prisons, schools, and hospitals. It would be a difficult but rewarding research project to trace the green Crown tiles to all the places they travelled, and the impact they had. The Japanese workers around the time of 1960 could not have imagined the supply-chain of their production. This is a line of questioning that could be fruitful for the historical and geographical imagination, especially in a museum setting.

Presentness

'A lot of people think that archaeology – archaeologists – discover the past. And that's only a tiny bit true. I think it's more accurate to say that they work on what remains.' Archaeologist, Michael Shanks (Hershman and Shanks 2012: 224).²

This assertion is humbling, because it speaks to what we actually do as curators, historians, or museum professionals. We may think we are journeying back in time, but in fact we work on what remains in the present, and that is intermeshed with our own present lives. For my presentation at the *On the Properties of Things* conference I brought a single tile from the Weyburn collection, one labelled 'non artifact.' In fact, it was the single tile not officially catalogued in the museum collection. I keep it in my office. I chose to highlight this tile for its conspicuous meaning in the present - its presentness - and what it tells us about the arbitrary nature of collecting and interpreting objects. When we received the Weyburn tiles, we catalogued all 36 tiles (pictured in the container above), except for this straggler that appeared months later in another shipment. It was not catalogued, but it was given to me as a prop for hands-on sessions. In order to clarify its status, the director of Collection Services wrote 'non artifact' on the back. The inscription is a powerful reminder that all artifacts and collections exist in the present, and are subject to random accidents of fate that can determine their nature as 'object' or 'artifact'. Once we take these objects into an imagined past, we are reducing the possibilities for its open, honest interpretation in the present.³

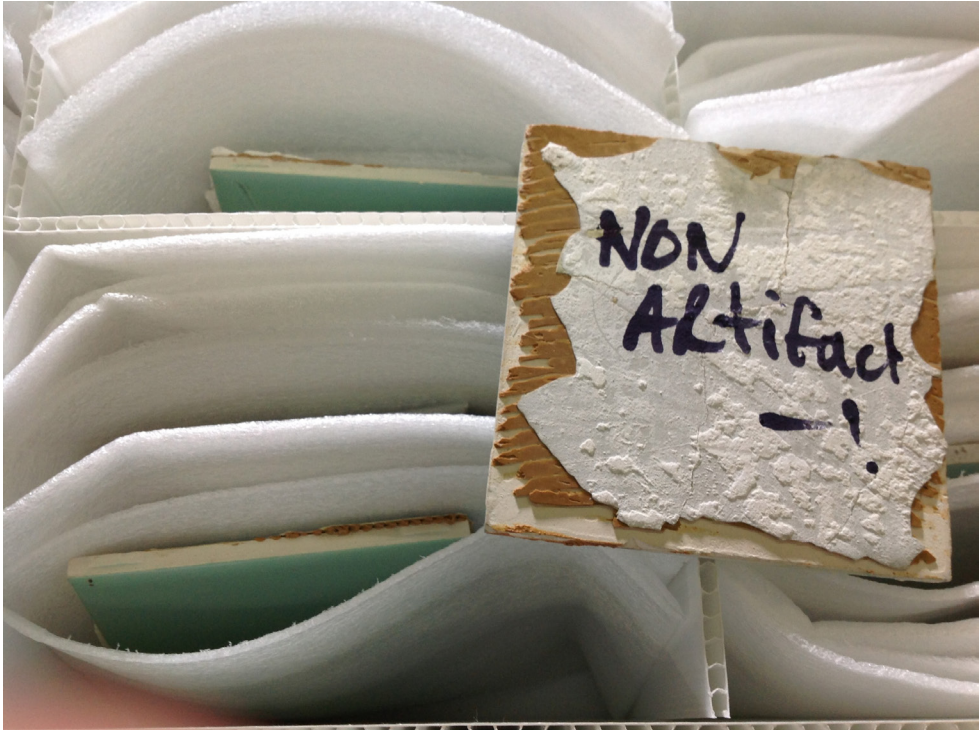


Figure 6. 'NON Artifact—!' green tile. Image courtesy of Ingenium: Canada's Museums of Science and Innovation, artifact no. 2009.0060

The biography of these green tiles in the present, therefore, is just as rich as their historical biography. They have been part of a recent hospital demolition, a collecting story, conservation research, exhibits, and a current move to a new storage facility. I have taken the 'non artifact' tile to many classes and conferences, and it has had an impact on many people through its many stories. It is like the Coke bottle in the 1980 film *The Gods Must be Crazy*, travelling through many communities, uses and contexts, all the while gathering meaning. Museums are keepers of this present as much as the past.

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Notes

- 1 This paper is based on a presentation that I gave at the conference *On the Properties of Things: Collective Knowledge and the Objects of the Museum* (<https://onthepropertiesofthings.rula.info/> accessed 6 July 2019). I presented an earlier version of this paper at *It's Not What You Think: Communicating Medical Materialities*, a workshop at Medical Museion, University of Copenhagen, 8-9 March 2013. Workshop website www.museion.ku.dk/itsnotwhatyouthink/ accessed 6 July 2019
- 2 Also see Shanks 2012, 26: 'For while dates of events are clearly important to archaeological and historical accounts, the time of archaeology is distinctively concerned more with what remains, with what becomes of what was, with the way the past hangs on, lingers, is lost, or may be collected and cared for, left as legacy.'

- ³ The tension between the past and present contexts of artifacts is beautifully contextualized in this recent exhibition and conference, *Statues Also Die (Anche Le Statue Muoiono), Conflict and Heritage from the Ancient World to the Modern Day* 9 March – 9 September 2018, Exhibition venues: Museo Egizio; Fondazione Sandretto Re Rebaudengo (closing date 29 May 2018); Musei Reali (Salone delle Guardie Svizzere closing date 3 June 2018). <http://fsrr.org/en/mostre/statues-also-die/> accessed 6 July 2019.

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