

Of the three circlets lying in front of me two are old coins, blackened, blurred, and with uneven edges. I brought them a long time ago from Mongolia, and although they converged for the first time on my desk they are connected in a very special way.

The first circlet of initiation

This copper coin comes from a bazaar held on Sundays in Ulan Bator. Every week this enormous dusty square in the western periphery on of the town, near the new cemetery (after it was shifted from a picturesque oasis among the last Chinese houses at the foot of the Gandan monastery hill), there appears a crowd of traders, clients, and persons simply examining the great variety of old oddments. A considerable part of the items on sale produces the impression of having been lying around in the streets for six days, and on the seventh day, for reasons totally incomprehensible, suddenly promoted to the role of commodities for sale. As a rule, I rapidly crossed this part of the marketplace and made my way towards a small area where better quality objects are offered. Here, old men dressed not in tacky jackets like the others but in festive Mongolian costumes, sauntered next to a high fence made of boards and showed the jostling commoners - or not, depending on the assessment of the client - a concealed remnant of old silver jewellery with corals and turquoise, an agate or porcelain snuff box, a lamaic icon painted on cloth or, the rarest of all, a brass burkhan.

Today, it is impossible to evoke the atmosphere of those illegal quests. In Mongolia during the early 1970s, a state whose capital not by accident still displayed a statue of Stalin, the possession and flaunting of sacral objects from the domain of the recently quashed lamaic religion were not totally safe either for the sellers or the buyers (chiefly foreigners planning to take

ETHNOLOGIST EN ROUTE

JERZY S. WASILEWSKI

The Secret History of Objects

the purchases out of the country – in those instances, the authorities immediately treated the religious piece as a valuable example of local culture). Such items as snuff boxes could be displayed with greater panache, producing an attachment, concealed on a daily basis, to eliminated and vanishing forms of national culture in which offering snuff as a form of greeting was universally celebrated. The more valuable samples were studied by a huddled group of admirers. When in the afternoons the square grew emptier the old connoisseurs sat in a row next to the fence and, smoking long pipes, showed each other the most precious snuffboxes belonging to them and not necessarily for sale. Pointing their fingers at the details they conducted meticulous debates about the impact exerted on the price by a pattern created by the grains of the stone, the setting of the coral or an insect trapped in the walls of an amber bottle. Jewellery trade of the poor - I thought.

But on that particular day I was drawn to the worse part of the bazaar, to all those petty items and old ware arranged in piles on newspapers lying on the ground. I cannot say why from among scores of such offers I chose this particular chest and in it, underneath a lay-



er of identical rusty screws and used motorcycle spark plugs, I extracted this circlet. I do remember that several years later I was still capable of recalling the magnetic attraction that led me there. Today, I am not certain whether this was not a researcher's ordinary bazaar fever, an urge to examine everything. On the other hand, perhaps something emanating from that spot compelled me to discover the illegible and dirt encrusted coin.

On one side: a tsarist two-headed eagle with an orb and a sceptre in its claws. On the other, contrary to expectations, by no means the bearded profile of Nicholas II; underneath the dirt, scraped off with a fingernail, there emerged the date: 1863-1864 and around it a Cirylic inscription: "Za usmirennye pol'skago miatezha" (For stifling the Polish rebellion).

This is not a coin then but a medal for putting down the January Uprising! I recall that Żeromski mentioned it in *Szyfowe prace*. Discovered in a Central Asian bazaar it must, naturally, produce an extremely emotional reaction, astonishment at the good fortune, coincidence, and bond despite such great distances. Only a few would not become excited by such a twist of fate and an object carrying such a plethora of meanings. Right away there ensue speculations about the way in which it could have found itself in Mongolia. The object itself suggests the following possibility: since it is missing an eyelet for hanging it - we can see that it was broken off and the gap hurriedly concealed - it must have been passed off somewhere as a coin. In a tavern along the Kiakhtin route an officer of the Baikal Cossacks escorting traders on their way to Urga carelessly hurled a handful of copper coins onto a damp bar counter...

What about the earlier, Polish stages of this route? Who and for what heroic deed was awarded this medal? Was it for valour, ingenuity or immorality? Perhaps it was granted *za khrabrost* to junker Zubov, a half-

blood Circassian but a *dzhigit* of extraordinary courage and fierceness, who after a victorious skirmish somewhere along the roads of northern Mazovia confronted a group of insurgents and chased its three young commanders to a manor house. Here, they hid in a maiden's room on the upper storey. Zubov rushed in with a Cossack, a salvo was fired, all the bullets struck the doorframe, and the inferior gunmen were slashed by shashka sabres ...

Or was it presented for wartime skill to Dukmanov, officer and veteran of the Crimean War, experienced in battles waged in the Caucasus, who in the Augustów gubernia cleverly defended wagons carrying ammunition, and having caught a local inhabitant used a knout to extract information about the route of the rebels. Dukmanov first did not understand why the captive was babbling about sheepskin coats, but finally realised that he was being told the names of the villages where the insurgents were to receive supplies in the form of ... sheepskin coats. The trap ended with a bloody massacre. Much later, both Zubov and Dukmanov were transferred to Transbaikal as part of constant translocations within the Empire.

Wartime valour was, however, rewarded rather with the Cross of St. Andrew, presented also for other merits: loyalty to the ruler, cooperation with legitimate authorities, eager introduction of the new order. Perhaps it was received by Vogt Krasko from the region of Kowno, who was kindly permitted to choose: either the village was to be burned down and all its inhabitants exiled somewhere near the border with Turkestan, or he could organize a Muraviov rural guard, denounce the agitators, and assist in catching the last survivals of the Uprising wandering in the forests. It was he, with a medal granted for being able to force even Polish landowners to sign loyalty declarations and probably for catching someone of great importance and later hanged in Wilno, who left as a



voluntary émigré for the steppes on the Baikal, where land was for the taking. Strange, he did not choose Vershina but preferred to settle down even further, all the way next to the Chinese cordon.

Why am I thinking of all those scenario episodes? Would an academic study on an artefact contain such imaginary visions, which quite a few items are capable of easily evoking? All those stories about a single bullet, a yellow shoe, the sofa of a Gestapo officer and countless other objects – would it not be better to leave them as material for a literary construction? In science I am dissatisfied with idiography alone and grow bored with stringing facts on the single thread of chronology without reconstructing wider and more abstract patterns – configurations and relations, model-like solutions and systemic dependencies.

Ethnography must be also realistic – otherwise it would not be itself at all. Although in my earlier research I treated an object almost exclusively as a representation of a certain intellectual system (envisaging it as a text, a carrier of symbols, a correlate of beliefs and imaginings, a consolidated record of an intellectual or social system), in a more extensive presentation I do not intend to be satisfied with a systemic, synchronic dimension. Let it contain a threat of diachrony so that the concrete individual history of things would not be lost; the same holds true for the history of the people in whose hands those items found themselves and into whose genealogies they became intertwined.

A place where I specially miss such information is the ethnographic museum. In these storehouses of things all the extra-material contexts or backdrops of an artefact are restricted. More, the unique is intentionally and in a programme-like manner omitted. Looking at an item we shall not find out anything about its individual history, past, and meaning for all those who handled it – from the producer to the collector who had extracted it from its contexts and inserted it into his text, thus granting it new meanings and endowing it with different emotions. Show me the fate of a concrete work of human ingenuity before it became part of an exhibition, frozen beneath glass as yet another exhibit.¹

Only a small regional museum or a memorial room are not ashamed to offer such information. And even if the guidebook does not disclose it we are forced to resort to our imagination.

One has to set into motion a certain “hermeneutic of things” and open up towards the language of the object. To do so one does not have to be a collector, albeit owning a collection does facilitate the process of opening up, especially if it takes place in special circumstances. The object possesses power. It is merely necessary to cross its path and it will compel us to listen to its story. Then we shall view also other items differently. Time to take a look at the second coin.

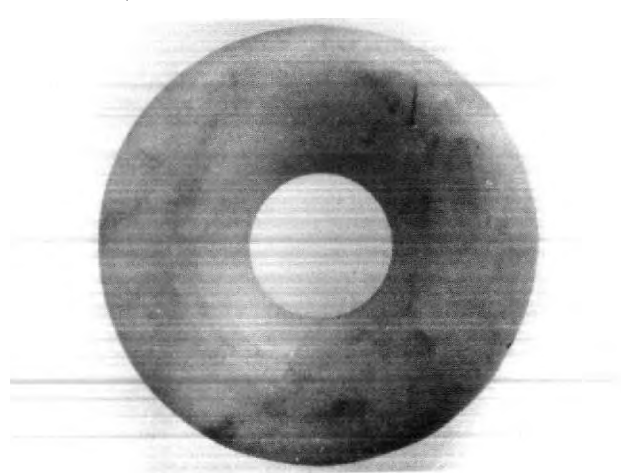
The second circlet of initiation

This is already a genuine coin. Brass, with Chinese and Uighur symbols around a square opening in the middle - the opening was used to string coins for the sake of thesaurisation, to braid them into hair, and to sew them on as a decoration of clothes. Just like all coins out of circulation it could serve assorted practical purposes, e.g. as the ending of a rope used for tying a lamaic book. The addition (to one or several linked coins) of a piece of sheep wool created a pompon of sorts with a weight. It was used for playing a game of *tebek*, consisting of kicking it in the air time and again, similarly as the game of *zoška* played in Warsaw courtyards and playgrounds.

I recall that when I played *zoška* I was intrigued by its name. After all, it has nothing in common with the principles of the game or its technique, and we do not know the identity of the mysterious woman after whom it was named. I read somewhere that it was used already in ancient Rome - the game was mentioned by one of the Plinys. Perhaps this is the source? But then there was no Latin counterpart of the Greek name: Sophia (which could have been the eventual source of our native *Zoška*). The origin of the name – and the game – thus remained a mystery until I came across its Mongolian counterpart.

In Mongolian this copper coin is known as *dzos*, which literally means “copper”. In Buryat pronunciation it becomes *zos*, but even if I had earlier thought about it I would have never associated *zos* with the Polish *zoška* owing to the thousands of kilometres separating these forms both linguistically and geographically. Now I come across information that renders this connection credible.

Grigoriy Nikolayevich Potanin recounted (referring to approximately the mid-nineteenth century) that cadets of the military academy in the West Siberian town of Omsk used to play a game called *zoška*.² Eureka! Since *zoška* was recorded in Siberia in a version that has no meaning in Russian (it is not mentioned in any dictionary and the name as such does not occur in Russian) then it must have been borrowed from the



Buryats (a suggestion made by the author, thus dispelling our doubts about the long distance from Buryatia to Omsk). Since the Buryat word did not sound natural in Russian an ending was added to make declination easier, thus creating *zoska*.

The familiar *zoska* was, therefore, originally a Mongolian and Buryat copper coin with the intermediary of a Russian semantic form. I already know who brought it to Poland: speaking metaphorically, it was the same graduates of the Omsk and Irkutsk military academies who were sent to conduct *usmirenyye pol'skogo miatezha*, and who later returned with medals. We are already familiar with this route – someone who had discovered in that part of the world the first copper coin, material proof of contact between the distant steppe and Mazovia, immediately becomes convinced that the second circlet also traversed an identical path at the same time and travelling with the same people. A material object - as tangible as possible – suffices as evidence of the genuine nature of such a hypothetical reconstruction.

There is no greater joy for a researcher than when an event he personally experienced leads towards some sort of a scientific discovery or finding. There is also no greater temptation than to succumb to this allure. Our model, however, must be the crafty Odysseus, whose intellect and strong will power prevented him from listening to the seductive and confusing voices of the Sirens. To what mast of scepticism must we tie ourselves in order to sail safely and cautiously towards true discoveries? While building scientific hypotheses are we capable of getting rid of the temptation to connect facts that became linked in our daily life in which research is, after all, immersed? Can we protect ourselves against the outright "compulsion to built associations" that renders us blind to the fact that certain relations do not exist "really", but in the manner of Ruskin's beauty are only "in the eye of the beholder"?

So many classification, periodisations, reconstructions, and models show facts in some sort of an association and grouping not because this is the way they are connected organically but because thanks to that procedure all corresponds in the author's scientific bookkeeping. No finding, thing or piece of information can remain useless, superfluous or un-interpreted. Everything has its place, all matches in a learned construction simply because this is the way it is associated by the researcher, offering him a pleasant feeling of order and harmony.

A single pebble suffices to topple this psychological construction, this synthesis of truth and falsehood - a harsh warning to never complete a given theory (construct, model).

A single book suffices as long as it is the right one. Take the example of *Zly* by Leopold Tyrmand: so

many details about Warsaw of the 1950s, an outright ethnography of the town. There is even information about games, which before the war included *pliszki*, *cymbergaj* and others, but not *zoska*, which appeared immediately after the war.

Who brought it? It was not the Baikal Cossacks of the Uprising era, after all? Am I, therefore, forced to abandon the image of Russian soldiers playing *v zosku* and watched by Polish children? This is already more than I can bear – the power of both metal circlets is much too great. I shall thus continue holding on to the conviction that it was the soldiers who came from the East, naturally not tsarist soldiers but Red Army men. If, and this is quite possible, I come across signals that *zoska* was played already before the war (although not necessarily in Warsaw) I shall willingly return to the earlier hypothesis. One way or another, regardless of the proposed dates, nothing will topple my opinion that the game arrived together with the army. The proof provided by both objects is simply much too strong.

The third circlet - the third lesson

This object too has an aperture, although it is no longer a copper coin but a slightly larger jade circle with greenish veins, flattened, thin, and with an inner orifice with rounded edges. And nothing more.

We may only surmise that this is a Chinese product; at any rate, the Mongols never pursued this craft. Otherwise, there is no information (unless its steep price would comprise some sort of substitute data). Ideal simplicity, the absence of any sort of stylistic features, patterns, incisions or even a knob. Nor is there any point of departure for suppositions about origin, age, purpose or even current usage. A small enigma, a mysterious monolith, a mute child of anonymous parents, a Kaspar Hauser puzzle.

The silence of this object provokes. In the cultural reality of Central Asia one may assume, for all practical purposes, only a single function - that of an ornament. Could this have been an accessory for a snuff pouch, a weight making it easier to hang the latter on a belt? Mongolian accessories, similarly as their better-known Japanese counterparts, *netsuke*, were, as a rule, figural. Perhaps then this is some sort of an embellishment of a woman's festive costume? In that case it should feature an ornament, a flower, a decorative detail.

Can a sensible conclusion be drawn from sheer silence? Is the meaning of an object determined by the fact that it has no visible sign telling us something about its identity? Or perhaps one should turn this deficiency into a virtue and recall that the extremely ascetic nature of an object could serve the embodiment of abstract values: the ideal, the absolute, the transcendent. Not by accident were such stone and bronze circlets featuring intriguing simplicity known

in China already during antiquity. Quite possibly the same property that was decisive for their power at that time grants them value when they are smuggled from former imperial collections to make their way onto the antiques market. If the original old case with imperial seals also survived then it will act as legible guarantee that it was precisely this object whose power fascinated rulers of ancient dynasties. It will be presented by one of the great auction houses in London or Hong Kong at an auction held especially for this single artefact, described as a “very important ritual disc (bi)”.

The simplest shapes and objects best materialize eternity - regardless whether they are small circles made of shells, about whose past so much was known by the Trobrianders, or monstrous circles from other islands of the South Seas, veritable mill stones exerting magnetic attraction even in an antique shop in the capital of one of the former colonial powers.

Power belongs not only to lavish, luxurious, and beautiful objects. True, they too provide an awareness of contact with transcendence. When touring a cathedral treasury or a museum adjoining an Eastern rite church and looking at an exceptional golden pectoral or a church cross with a knob I envision how a dying cardinal or an archimandrite grasped it on his deathbed so that he might feel it with his fingers while thinking that the Saviour was not abandoning him. On the other hand, when I handle a pair of imposing, massive, and sophisticated ritual knives I know just how a person performing a lamaic sacrifice must have felt during a ceremony of ousting evil by offering a man-shaped kukla, the *dzolig*. Paraphernalia are a powerful guarantee of the might of each religious act.

Naturally, this force belongs only to a genuine object and not some sort of purchase, the outcome of a short-lived adventure in a supermarket born out of a fleeting relationship between the client and the great whore of the market. We know that an object-gadget will make its way across our home in a crowd of others, along the path between the shopping cart and the garbage bin. A genuine object is immortal. A copper plate hurled into a fire during a potlatch will be remembered for long. Iconoclasts, hunveibins, Savonarolas, Atilias and fashionistas who tell us not to wear the design of the past season will be always about. But it is the thing that ultimately is our only eternity. A well-known aphorism maintaining that man is an episode in the history of an object produces a collector's spontaneous protest that is lesser than that of others.

Things compel us to think about eternity in both directions – focused on the future and longevity, on the past and eternity. Just like the silver baptismal bowl commemorating seven generations of the Cas-torp family and evoking in the young Hans *a strange, dreamy, troubling sense: of change in the midst of dura-*

*tion, of time as both flowing and persisting, of recurrence in continuity.*³

In order to enroot us in the past the object too must be well embedded in it. This is why the sign of the producer is so important - the author's signature, the stamp of a workshop, the thin engraved initials of clockmakers repairing an old mechanism, or the numbers written with a carpenter's thick pencil at the bottom of commode drawers so that they would fit better. Enrootment in a cultural context is decisive for identity. An old Turkmenian carpet possesses stylistic features enabling its identification not only with the Ersari tribal group but also with the region of the small town of Dali on the Amu Darya, where it was executed; a contemporary Afghani carpet does not provide the observer with an opportunity for tracing its lineage – it is a collection of patterns, of which each once belonged to some other clan and defined a concrete and different provenance.

Thanks to things we also focus on the future. It is things that force the collector to think about his heirs, successors, and future observers. By enrooting us in the past and growing into the future they expand our personality and cultural identity. Someone who does not wish to limit himself to an identity *emploi* determined by family tradition and its mementoes can build a different identity out of objects he had personally collected.⁴ It is possible to free oneself from the restraints of own culture and horizon of behaviour. By collecting *exotica* I touch the reality of the most distant past and contact with Chinese artefacts enables me to withdraw into the past as far as possible. While drinking tea at a low table, which once was an “opium bed” in a Chinese opium den, I do not become a Chinese from the past but find it easier to imagine that I am entering that world.

Contrary to the acclaimed alternative: “To be or to have” I insist that “to have” (a collection of things) carries the same spiritual value as “to be” (a collector of things).

Endnotes

- ¹ As recalled by Scandinavian ethnology – see: e.g. L. Otto, L. Pedersen, *Collecting oneself. Life stories and objects of memory*, “Ethnologia Scandinavica”, vol. 28, 1998, pp. 77-92.
- ² G. N. Potanin, *Ocherki severo-zapadnoy Mongolii*, Sankt Peterburg 1881, p. 120.
- ³ T. Mann, *Czarodziejska góra*, Warszawa 1956, p. 48.
- ⁴ A review of such contemporary attitudes towards souvenirs in: B. Rogan, *Things with a history - and other possessions*, “Ethnologia Scandinavica”, vol. 28, 1998, pp. 93-107. Ibid. basic literature for “material culture” thus comprehended by contemporary Anglo-Saxon anthropology.