

“Objects, memory and cultural identity in (re)construction”

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Objects and Memories: Local identity and material heritage in France

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Abstract

In France, cities, counties and regions use local heritage as an identity marker and a publicity tool. Museums and eco-museums are mobilized toward that goal and produce ‘patrimonial value’ through the highlighting of buildings and objects defined as symbols or markers of the locale’s identity. However what enable these objects, stories and any other elements drawn from the past to reach us, what constitutes them as ‘heritage’ is not only determined by the conscious and deliberate choice of a community or a cultural institution. It is also the result of a social and historical process that already integrated these objects within an ensemble of collective references. Any anthropological analysis of the museum object, or more largely of the object put on display in a public or private collection, must include a questioning about the object within its own history. One can then understand the social dynamics at play in the process that brought it to its contemporary symbolic and physical status as well as the collective and individual logics that endows the object with its meaning: a changing and multiple meaning closely linked to the context of the object’s production and at the same time attached to the *evolution* of this object. An object does not mean anything by essence or by nature. It does not by itself carry any other value than the ones given to it through its trade among people. Therefore, its potential heritage value also comes from an act or a series of act done by individuals and/or social groups. It means that any object has a symbolic and social existence only to the extent that it has a history, in other words because it is part of History.

Based on various field researches, especially about ceramic production in Burgundy, this paper attempts to show that social sciences are able to finely grasp how an heritage is constructed through the entanglement of collective and individual memory, the material and the immaterial, never totally separated.