

Gold Om Necklace & Wooden Printing Blocks

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Objects tell the stories of human history more effectively than humans. Objects watch but don't see, they hear but don't speak, they are born but they never die. Objects outlive humans and have their own stories that stretch beyond the stories we humans can tell. For this project, I concerned myself with two very different objects. My personal object is an Om necklace that was given to me by my grandmother and the object that I chose from the study collection was a set of two wood block printing blocks.

My Om necklace was given to me by my grandmother. Made from 14-karat gold, the necklace possesses the qualities that any sample of gold would: it is shiny and malleable. It absorbs the temperature of the setting it is in—warm against the skin and cold when left in cooler temperatures. The chain is composed of multiple thinner strands woven together to create one thicker one. The gold Om pendant has two sides: the front has small stones embedded into it while the back is smooth. The pendant has smooth edges and takes the shape of an Om, the fundamental sound of creation in Hinduism and a symbol for the religion as a whole. On the back of the chain there is a lock, the original locking system broke, so to improvise part of the opening I pressed it down to stop the link from opening. The makeshift nature of the improvisation often makes unclasping the lock difficult.

The object came into my possession at birth, I received it from my grandmother as a present. Before she made the 16-hour flight journey she bought the necklace in her hometown of Ahmedabad, brought it to her local temple to be blessed, then boarded an Airbus A321 bound for JFK airport with my necklace in her handbag. My mom kept the necklace safe for thirteen years. As a child, I had never seen it. After the passing of my grandmother, my mother finally revealed it to me. Since then the necklace has become one of my most prized possessions.

In Indian/Hindu tradition it is typical to give newborns gifts upon their birth. One of the most common gifts is gold Om chains such as my own. As a kid, I never really wore the necklace, because my parents did not think giving a gold necklace to a 7-year-old who loses an incredible amount of things was a great idea. However, in April of 2020, my grandmother passed away. After that day I started wearing the necklace as it became a reminder of her. Due to the global pandemic and my grandmother living in India I was thousands of kilometers away as she left this world. I wear the necklace to remind myself of her and to remind myself of my Indian heritage

Gold is a slightly superstitious metal in Hinduism as it is believed to carry blessings and protect the owner of the item better than others. In India jewelry often acted as a person's personal, portable bank. One's entire life savings took the form of gold and diamonds before the times of banks would often be worn through jewelry. This tradition continues to this day. In India gold also represents an investment, many Indians invest in gold and have their wealth in the form of gold bars rather than Rupees. Gold is the most stable currency in the world and outlives countries. For thousands of years, gold has retained its value unlike any other medium of trade.

Made up of two materials, the wear of these wood blocks tells the story of Indian heritage and the preservation of culture. As you run your fingers over the object you feel two entirely different sensations. The frame and handle of the block are made out of wood and feel damp and sticky to the touch. The carved design is sharp and the points of the metal prick your finger says you touch them. The metal is cold to the touch. There are clear signs of wear on both of the blocks. The wood is sticky with what is likely ink residue, further confirming the function of the blocks. Both of the prints are slightly stained green also showing the effects of the ink on the

blocks. Broken metal parts in the design of the blocks further show the wear of the blocks. In parts of the design the metal is broken, likely as the product of constant use. Block prints like this are very common in the Rajasthan province of India. It is possible, however, I have no way of proving this, that the block comes from that region. The blocks, however, may look similar in their composition and certainly feel similar in weight, but they are distinctly different.

The borders of the floral block that presumably once were straight have been whittled into imprints. Overall the designs of both blocks are broken and the wood is scratched. There are two blocks, in shape very similar yet in design very different. One consists of a very common Indian block printing design. The design consists of a repeated floral pattern. The floral block is almost a perfect square while the other block is a rectangle. The block on the left depicts a scene, it is very difficult to decipher what it depicts but it is very different from the floral block or any other Indian wood printing block. Based on other examples I found, the blocks looked more similar to the style of European block printing. The bottom half of the block seems to frame the scene above it. The arches in the arrangement mimic European rather than Indian architecture. It is entirely possible that these two blocks come from opposite ends of the world and potentially completely different periods. Presented as a set, my first assumption was that the blocks came as a set and that the objects were from similar parts of the world and have always been together since their creations. However, after doing more research I am unsure.

The most obvious similarity between the necklace and the wood printing blocks is that they are both (presumably) from India. While different in many ways the origin of the object and personal journeys of the objects are very comparable. Both were created in India, likely using Indian materials. Decades later both of the objects found themselves in New York City at the

Bard Graduate Center. Both of the objects tell a similar story. The story of globalization, one object shows how books are transported across the world to be studied hundreds of years later. While the other tells the story of immigrants, moving across the world from everything they ever knew for better opportunities. Both objects left India and arrived in America for better opportunities, studies, or life. While the origins and destination of the objects are the same, their journeys are likely completely different. The truth is we know almost nothing about the journey of the blocks. In that uncertainty lies the allure of objects, we have to piece together the lives of the objects because they can't tell us.

The largest difference between the two objects is their purpose. The necklace's purpose is almost entirely symbolic as it functions as an accessory. The necklace's purpose is almost entirely symbolic as it functions as an accessory. It has no real practical function. It was created with the only purpose of expressing the identity of the wearer to the beholder. However, the blocks are tools and are used as proprietors of trade. To a fabric printer, these blockers were likely their livelihood, a family could have survived off of these blocks. Countless dresses, shirts, and saris have this floral design imprinted onto them. These blocks have changed the lives of countless people.

Bearing in mind everything said before, the largest similarity between the two objects is that they both tell stories. My necklace tells the story of my grandmother when she can't. The wood blocks tell the story of the craftsman who made them, the block printers who used them, and the people who wear the design. As these items pass through owners they retain marks of their previous beholders. A particular scratch may be proof of one owner, a chip might be the imprint of another. Objects pass through history witnesses, observing the world around them and

how that world changes. Thinking about objects as active matter means that we must think of objects as *participants* in their individual history. They are not bystanders who are unimportant in our thoughts about the past, but they are active in their histories. And they are important, we must also consider objects alongside people when thinking about the past. Objects tell the past better, unbiased, pure, a *true* rendition of the past.

In conclusion, over these three weeks, I have learned just how important objects are to humans. By looking so closely at objects I have gained a new perspective on the material world and the scope of objects as storytellers. Before this program, I had never given that much thought to all the objects that I interact with daily and how important they are to me and the world. From now on I will not look at objects in the same light. And I urge the reader to do the same, every time you look at an object think about the life that the object has and the stories that it can tell. I am so thankful that I have gotten this opportunity, it is truly life-changing.