

Ibo Carving v. *Supernatural* Amulet Replica:
How Environment Impacts an Object's Development

Skyler Chouloute
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Function awards personality to an object. Whether as a decoration, accessory, tool, or other, function continues to write each object's story to tell. My replica of an amulet from the CW series *Supernatural*, owned by the character Dean, has been able to tell several stories throughout its life of use as an object from my personal collection. My study object, a (probable) Ibo cane top, has not been awarded the same privilege. The ambiguity surrounding the history of both objects as well as the environment that each object has lived in, has impacted the way that each object has developed.

The replica of Dean's amulet from *Supernatural* functions as an accessory. It has a smooth black cord and silver clasps that adjust the necklace's length by an approximate inch and a half. The charm is the heart of the amulet, given that it is larger, denser, and brighter than the cord. The charm is double-sided, slightly taller and larger than a penny, and has a range of gold hues. The charm displays a humanoid figure with a forehead embellishment and horns. The forehead embellishment is a rounded engraving similar to an "e," or backwards "e" depending on the side. The face displays relatively small eyes, a narrow nose, thin lines for lips, and large, low-sitting ears. The horns extend from either side near the highest point of the head, and a keyhole shaped structure that functions as a keychain extends from the highest point.

The Ibo woodcarving's function is not fully determined, though it is suspected to be a cane head. It is a knelt human figure about the length of a brand-new unsharpened pencil. The bas-relief carving has varying widths along its length. At its thickest point, it is no wider than the width of a horizontal stick of gum. At its thinnest point, it is about the width of a quarter. The figure itself is textured; upon closer examination I can see the irregularity of where the wood was chipped away. It is an array of fading colors, but seems to have once been green, yellow, red, and brown. The figure dons a form of headwear, possibly a hat or rasta cap, with a striped

design. Its face displays large eyes, a wide-bottomed nose, and fairly thick lips, with ears that nearly run parallel to its eyes. The carving has narrow shoulders, a faded green shirt, and holds what seems to be a fish or bag. It has one detailed hand, and one more circular hand. The person kneels on a hollow wooden structure which can be placed upon a stand so the figure sits upright.

The history of both objects is difficult to determine. The carver of the cane top was most likely Ibo, but the time-period of its creation is unknown. The history of the *Supernatural* replica is rather untraceable. It was fulfilled by Amazon from a company named Tojwi, which distributes a range of products. Tojwi is based in China, but the exact location of their factory is unknown. Even within *Supernatural*, the full history of the object is not known. However, its function is clear. First, it was a gift from protagonist Sam Winchester to his brother, Dean. Then, an angel told them that it was an amulet that glows bright in the presence of the Christian God. The show revealed that Sam Winchester received the object from a family friend, but the full origin story of the object remains unknown.

The uncertainty surrounding the specific history of the carved figure can be attributed to the manner in which it was obtained. This figure was procured by Stephen Blank as memorabilia for his Nigeria trip. Blank purchased the figure from a peddler in Lagos, Nigeria in the 1970s. After his return to the United States, he donated it to Bard Graduate Center's Study Collection in New York. Without Blank's inquiry, the history of the object remains unattainable. The uncertainty surrounding the history of the amulet replica can be attributed to its manufacturer and *Supernatural's* costume design team. The team never revealed the source of the amulet's design and, without this knowledge, the design remains ambiguous. The manufacturer of the amulet replica does not list their factory location online. I ordered this replica from China to New York due to my profound interest in *Supernatural*; the meticulously developed plot and inclusion of

the history of several cultures appealed to me. This object found its home around my and many of my friends' necks since its purchase in late 2021.

My personal connection to the amulet replica altered its purpose in a way that the Study Collection object has never experienced. I purchased the amulet out of adoration for the show and as a display of my interests. Upon my first day wearing it to school, my necklace received a wealth of compliments specifically referring to its unique design. It opened new pathways of interaction with people that I had never spoken to previously. Among my friends, it became an inside joke, and often referred to as the "tiki-tiki" in reference to its tiki mask-like appearance. This new life gave the object a personality and added to its function as a conversation starter. Everyday when I showed up to school, my friends searched my neck for the now assigned emblem of my person. Each day, a friend would wear it and return it after. By this point, the necklace adopted a double-meaning for me and a significance to my friend group.

The BGC Study Collection object has lived behind a locked glass case ever since its donation, only being taken out for study purposes. This lack of everyday use deprives the study object of developing a story at the rate that my personal object did. The study object is not being used for its intended purpose. It was meant to be a cane head, and now it serves as an object of complex analysis. In being the subject of analysis, the cane head receives new interpretations of its qualities. These interpretations add to the life of the object: they live in the minds of each interpreter and change meaning throughout their interaction with the object. This allows the study object to adopt different identities with different people, but the object itself is deprived of a cohesive collective identity; this is where it contrasts the personality that my personal object has developed.

One interpretation of my necklace united an entire friend group. The “tiki-tiki” identity that it has adopted has the ability to extend beyond the amulet’s life and use. This identity, developed separately from the object’s function, provides it with an alternative life and collective meaning. Should the object lose functionality or fully abandon its representation of *Supernatural* to me, it will continue to live on in certain people’s minds as a “tiki-tiki,” a symbol of friendship and bonding.

The fact that the study collection object is deprived of group interaction and interpretation strips its life of a specific type of sentimental meaning. To the extent of my knowledge, the cane head only has one identity. To me, it is an object for analysis that has a profound history to tell, but no way to access it. The carver, peddler, donor, collection keeper, and other researchers may have a completely different interpretation of this object but, to truly give it the life that the replica has lived, the many interpretations must be shared. By communicating interpretations, perhaps the object could begin to connect people in a way that it is not able to now.