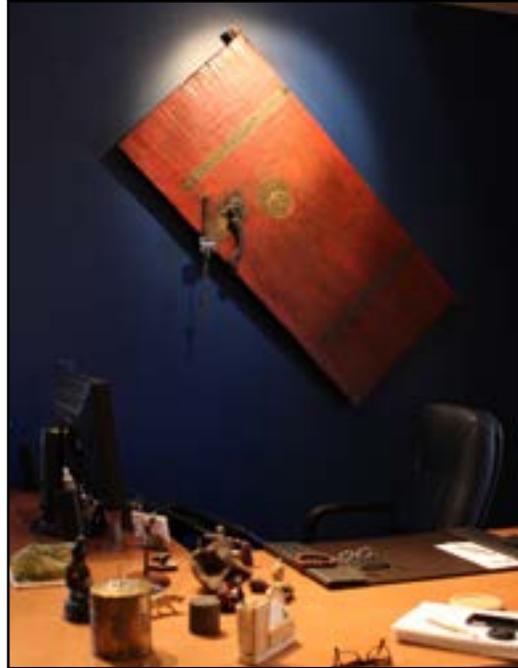


# A red door, a plastic bull, an iron sculpture and a chimpanzee



*How objects in an office reveal key aspects of character and identity.*

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Dr. John Olsen's office is fixed with all the traditional settings: a

wooden desk, a computer, several shiny, silver pens and an additional chair for visitors.

But the archaeology professor has a few other objects in this same space as well:

the neck bone of a wild yak, the head of a bison, the skull of a walrus, a Mesopotamian tribulum, a single bulb encased inside a large rock of pink Himalayan salt. While most professors have business cards or a notepad

situated on their desk, Dr. Olsen has toy-size figurines of a Coelacanth fish and a prehistoric andrewsarchus, many small Buddha and a meteorite from Russia.

But the most unique, and most substantial, of these artifacts is a red door taken from a cathedral in Tibet. It hangs behind his desk, juxtaposed against a blue wall with a single light cast upon it. Its color is faded towards the bottom, caked with dust and dirt from the many years of use, the scratches, cracks and holes contributing to its obsolescence. Its

intricate gold detailing still maintains a bit of luster in the right light.

The door marks a moment in time for Dr. Olsen, an opportunistic moment outside of a Tibetan cathedral, a chance encounter between a taxi driver and a DHL representative, the process of shelling out several hundred dollars in shipping costs.

"But it was so much fun,"

Dr. Olsen said. "I met wonderful people, including the taxi driver, including the DHL guy.

I accomplished my goal, this thing got home, I didn't get badly

reamed financially. So I've got it situated here so that when I'm sitting at my computer, I can still see this in my peripheral vision. And it reminds me of some really good times."

Even after the fieldwork is finished, the articles are published and the dissertations are assessed, certain memories attach themselves to various forms of tangible narratives. These personal artifacts are often abstract, situated inconspicuously on desks and in bookshelves.

For the beholder, they serve as a reminder, but also reveal characteristics of one's identity,

*"I feel something is lost if the story I told about that door doesn't accompany it in some way."*

history or dedication to their practice.

An abstract, plastic sculpture of a bull sits atop a bookshelf in the office of Dr. Maisa Taha, a linguistic anthropology professor. Unassuming, simple and no bigger than a child's toy block, the bull represents Dr. Taha's vibrant curiosity, having hunted down the artists behind several monuments inside a young town, leading to the purchase of the plastic sculpture as a remembrance of the Spanish artists.

"And it really was a side project from the dissertation I was doing," Dr. Taha said, "But I was so excited about this idea that I interviewed the artists."

The monuments in the town served as a form of education to the residents, a way to memorialize certain values of the town and make the space more habitable. They added character and created conversation—in a sense, like the plastic bull.

"In some way, it's a calling card," Dr. Taha said. "So when a visitor or colleague comes into my office they can see I have a little bull, they can see I have a Spanish fan up there. So it's sort of a way of communicating. And as a linguistic anthropologist I should know this, right? It's symbolic communication, and it's a way of not only telling other people who you are but maybe securing a place for yourself in the institution as well."

Constructing identity in an environment as large as a university is an important part of human distinction. Dressing the area of an office space with personal items therefore adds to the construction of individualism.

"People are different, and I think it's



*"I think it has something to do with identity and making the space you inhabit your own."*



*"If you're going to be in this space, are you satisfied with the space just as it is—kind of bare-walls and bookshelves filled with books? Or do you somehow want to place some things in that space that link the office to your home or to memorial other places?"*

important to think about how space can be transformed into place," said Dr. Drexel Woodson, a sociocultural anthropology professor. "I think it makes them more comfortable spending as much time as they spend in an office—I mean, you're there five days a week, five, six, seven hours, eight hours a day—so you want to make it not only habitable, but kind of hospitable, given your own taste and values."

Dr. Woodson keeps a variety of thick books in rows of multiple bookshelves. Being a book review editor, the walls of his office are paneled with previously reviewed literature, as well as published essays inherited from mentors and colleagues.

Between the rows of these books sits a cast iron, slightly rusted sculpture of a two-dimensional figure pushing what appears to be a massive cart, or bouet in Haitian Creole.

"It is a depiction of a man—and they're usually all men—who are the hardest working men in Haiti."

An object can tell a lot about a professor's fieldwork. It can also reveal something about their admiration for people.

"There are other people who work hard too," Dr. Woodson noted. "But you see these guys sweating in the sun and that, to me,

attaches this office to my anthropological work.”

For Dr. David Raichlen, a biological anthropology professor, this attachement comes in the form a framed photograph fixed above his desk.

The picture shows the leather-like feet of a chimp delicately holding a sparkling silver heel, in the same way a shoe salesman might present a product to an interested buyer.

Dr. Raichlen deals primarily with the energy costs of bipedalism—that is, how evolution brought humans to our current two-leg stride, while our closest living relatives still function as quadrupeds.

The photo was published in a 2007 issue of National Geographic along with the extensive research completed by Dr. Raichlen and a contributing team of anthropologists, anatomists and paleontologists. Illustrating the research began with a group of retired Hollywood chimps and an innovative photographer, “he had all of these ideas about how to photograph it and he came up with



*“I guess on some levels it just seems more appropriate to put up stuff in here that reminds me of what I do. Partly, it just serves as a reminder and a re-enforcer of what I do all day.”*

this idea of how feet have changed in human evolution.” From there, the photo accompanied Raichlen’s research in a 12-page spread.

But anthropology professors aren’t the only possessors of these tangible narratives. Resting on the desk inside the Oval Office is a wood carving of a gentle hand holding an egg—a Kenyan symbol of the fragility of life.

Situated on the bottom shelf of Dr. Karen Johnson’s bookcase is a Chucky doll—its mangled orange hair, scarred fair, bloody overalls and demonic eyes a symbol of “when good cells go bad.”

“Chucky cells are white blood cells that normally, in the blood stream, do good things to fight invaders,” the pathophysiology professor explained. “However, they become ‘chucky cells’ when they leave the bloodstream and enter tissues.”

The doll was an unconventional gift from a group of graduating students in 2007. It is encased inside a square shadow book, with the name of each student situated around the character. The doll serves as a symbol of Dr. Johnson’s methodical teaching style, utilizing original ways to teach intricate concepts in relatable and humorous ways.

Dr. Johnson has been a professor for over twenty years. She is also the writer of this story’s mother.

These objects serve as varying functions for the possessors—the construction of identity for one and a line of inaudible communication for another.

People reveal aspects of their character during the discussion of an object, and these trinkets become far richer when a story is attached.

“You decorate not to just keep your sanity but to also say, ‘This is me and this is why I’m different than the person next to me,’”

Dr. Olsen said. “This space then represents a distillation of the things that make me happy about my life decisions.”

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