

A Brief History of a Ceramic Fragment

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A white ceramic fragment is triangular in shape and curved, about 3 ½ inches (8 centimeters) long and 2 inches (5 centimeters) wide. Based on the curvature of the ceramic and the lip at the top, it most likely belonged to a cup or mug. The edges of the fragment on two sides show the exposed surface of the broken ceramic, while the third side is still covered by glaze. The name “Ellen” and a partial image of a knight on horseback holding a jousting lance and shield are visible on the fragment. “Ellen” is written in black block-script lettering. The knight is depicted with red, gray, gold, and black metallic paints. What is attached to this fragment hints that there might be a story behind how the ceramic item came to be broken. A yellow piece of paper with the phrase “our most sincere condolences at your tragic loss” is adhered with clear tape to the fragment, suggesting that the unbroken item was of personal importance. Stuck to the tape just above the note is a line of dust, indicating that the note has been attached to the fragment for some time. The language used in the note implies that the object in question was broken by someone other than the owner or user. Since there are no similar fragments nearby, it appears to have been some kind of keepsake rather than left behind or forgotten.

This description is what I imagine another person might observe if they found the ceramic fragment and wanted to know more. What is lacking in this description is the extent of significance that the ceramic mug fragment and its accompanying note represent for me, the current owner. One would not be able to guess that I used the mug in the kitchen of a library where I worked. Nor would one be able to guess that this mug was my favorite one to use because it coincidentally listed my middle name. One would not be able to guess that the mug was broken by my friend, who sent it flying across the library’s atrium one summer day in a moment of excitement. Or that I was at a summer internship when the mug was broken and that the person who wrote the note and attached it to the fragment was not the same person who actually broke the mug. One would not guess that I associate this fragment with that summer internship, the experiences that I gained working at the library, and my current career path. But even though I have had the fragment with me for six years, there are many aspects of this mug’s story that I do not know.

I had only been working at the library for a year before the mug was broken and the ceramic fragment was placed in my mailbox. I do not know how long the mug had been at the library before I started working there. I do not know who brought the mug in for people to use. Since I found it in the library’s communal kitchen, it either did not have much significance or was forgotten by whoever brought it. Based on the knight image and the name “Ellen,” the mug might have been a souvenir. It was most likely machine manufactured due to how crisp and sharp both the knight and name are. What is less clear is where this mug would have been sold. Could it have been purchased at a historic castle’s gift shop or other tourist attraction? At some kind of medieval festival or store? Understanding more of the mug’s history would not necessarily enhance the significance or change my connection with the fragment, but they are

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questions that have crossed my mind while considering the associations that I have attached to it.

How I interact with the fragment has also changed over the past few years. While I was living in Reno, it was just a fragment that I kept on my dresser and did not think about often. Since moving to Chicago for graduate school, the depth of its significance has changed. I do not interact with the people who broke the mug and placed it in my cubby as regularly, so it is a reminder of those friendships as well as where my story related to conservation science began. It is astounding to think about how much of this story has developed over the time that I have had the fragment and how much it will continue to do so. While the item is no longer able to hold tea, it fulfills a new purpose in my life. Sitting on my bookshelf at home, it reminds me of memories and associations that make me smile. It creates a talking point for people who see it when they are in my room. While the fragment is not a type of object likely to be displayed in a museum, it is of enough personal importance to pack in a box and move two thousand miles with me.

Thinking about my associations with the fragment prompts some questions about the items that end up on display in a museum. How has the significance and story changed over the span of an object's existence, from when it was made to when it became part of a collection? What new stories and associations are conservators, curators, historians, and the public creating from looking at and interacting with an object? What hidden stories or personal associations are not discernable from just looking at it? I think answers to this last question depend on the type of object as well as if there is any writing associated with it. But how will we ever truly know the depth of an object's history?