



Souvenirs: How They May Be or May Not Be Understood

Michael Hitchcock, Emeritus Professor, Institute for Creative and Cultural Entrepreneurship-Goldsmiths, University of London

This paper is based on a keynote lecture given by Michael Hitchcock, Emeritus Professor, Institute for Creative and Cultural Entrepreneurship at Goldsmiths, University of London, United Kingdom at the Souvenirs 2021 conference.

Introduction

According to the *Shorter Oxford English Dictionary of Historical Principles* (1973), the word 'souvenir' entered the English language in 1775 from French and means 'memory' with the associated meanings of 'keepsake' and a token of remembrance (1778). English and French are by no means the only languages that have tried to define this area of as memorabilia also exists in English as a Latin import associated with objects valued for their memories and historical interest, which can be applied in the professional field to a company or brand. This connection with memory can be illustrated by reference to van Eyck's portrait painting of 1432, in which large capitals are depicted, apparently carved on to stone, with the words *LEAL SOUVENIR* (loyal remembrance in French) (National Gallery, London). At the top of the painting is small inscription in Latin characters bearing the Greek words: *TUM OTHEOS* (then God). The meaning of the painting is unclear and it has been speculated that the portrait was painted after the sitter's death and that the crumbling parapet bearing the title might be an illusion to man's mortality (ibid.). The point illustrated here that needs to be made at the outset is that the term 'souvenir' is not invariably associated with tourism.

In Japan souvenirs are called *omiyage*, and are often associated with products of a particular region and bringing back such items from trips to give to family and co-workers is a carefully considered duty. A similar custom is observed in the Philippines where gifts known as *pasalubong* are given to friends, family members and colleagues. Indonesian (Bahasa Indonesia) is another language endowed with souvenir meanings such as *oleh-oleh*, *tanda mata* and *kenang-kenangan*, which may roughly be translated as variations on the word 'souvenir', but not necessarily linked to a specific variety.

There probably exist many other words for something like a souvenir in a wide variety of languages, perhaps meaning slightly different actions or things, and it would be tedious

to simply list them here. However, it is worth noting some observations about the above examples as they do help us to focus on what a souvenir might be. First, just look at the date that the word 'souvenir' is thought to have entered English as it is the height of what is known as the 'Grand Tour', the custom of taking a trip to the south by members of the northern European nobility and wealthy landed gentry between the 17th and 18th centuries until the advent of rail transport in the 19th century (Chard, 1999). It was a kind of educational rite-of passage in which these early tourists soaked up the learning and artistic merits of the Greco-Roman world and the Renaissance. This era marked the beginning of European guidebooks and we know that these wealthy travellers were encouraged to visit cabinets of curiosities or early museums as they travelled, and there were dealers who supplied them with artworks and other goods to take home, most famously Lord Hamilton in Naples, the husband of Emma, who was to become the lover of Horatio Nelson. Interestingly, as Chard has observed, the Hamiltons did not just sell artworks to tourists but also supplied experiences, notably Emma's impressions of Greco-Roman statues for which she posed in skimpy attire (Chard: personal communication).

Something similar applies to the Japanese variant of this business as there is a formidable trade *omiyage* in which continues to this day. In fact it is thought to be a number of authors on tourism that the purchase of an exquisite object associated with the destination visited is the second largest expenditure for Japanese after the cost of the trip itself. In some contexts the merchandising of souvenirs can be an economically profitable activity, but perhaps not in all contexts.

The edited volumes of 2000

The above examples from the Grand Tour and Japan tend to focus on the retailing of high end products, but as we shall see it is by no means the only way of looking at souvenirs, not least when one considers that experiences are very much to the fore in contemporary tourism. The term 'experiential tourism' is derived from B. Joseph Pine and James H. Gilmore's paper on the 'Experience Economy', which was published in 1998 and argues that this kind of economy activity follows on from the sequence of agrarian, industrial and service types of economy. My co-edited book with Ken Teague entitled *Souvenirs: the Material Culture of Tourism* (2000) appears only two years after this seminal paper on the experience economy and, though it is very much concerned with the materiality of souvenirs it is much more than this. As mentioned above dictionary definitions usually see souvenirs in terms of memory and their associations with tourism, but as we pointed out in our book based on a conference at the Horniman Museum, they can be much more than this. One of the reasons we held the conference at the Horniman Museum in London was the fact that the collections were originally based in part on Frederick Horniman's travels (Horniman Museum). He was a Member of Parliament who had inherited a fortune from his tea merchant father and was in many ways simply an upmarket tourist, though the objects that he collected have long been treated as ethnographic curios (*ibid.*).

Nelson Graburn's (2000) foreword to our book homes in on the diversity of what might be called a souvenir and we also discussed at the time whether souvenirs had to be tangible as the title of our book indicates. Music and food, for example, are regarded as 'intangible' heritage, though they may also be drawn into a discussion on souvenirs. Graburn's foreword and my introduction provide a useful overview of the many variants and definitions of the term 'souvenir', which would be difficult to summarise without repeating verbatim in a paper like this, but what is perhaps worth noting is Graburn's point that souvenirs do not just exist in the domain of tourism, but are also memories of other past phenomena and political events. The volume, for example, mentioned souvenirs associated with the Suffragette movement and in a similar vein drew attention to the 'solidarity souvenirs' associated with the Chiapas uprising in southern Mexico in the 1990s (Hitchcock, 2000). This association continues into the present with delegates to the G7 summit in Cornwall being offered upmarket and hand-crafted mementos to take away (The Times, 15th May, 2021). There are business angles to these examples, but that does not appear to be a primary motive as it is the cause or political association that is foremost. That said the business side of souvenir production and retail is certainly worth considering even though the motives for purchasing may range from social obligations as is the case with the Japanese, Philippine and Indonesian examples mentioned above to expressions of political sympathy. It is also possible that the term souvenir encompasses so many things that its original definition no longer applies, but I suspect that like the word 'art' we have simply become accustomed to it meaning many things and that we have already entered an era in which some kind of additional term like 'solidarity souvenir' is required.

At this point it is worth noting that our Souvenirs book did not come out alone and in the same year it was accompanied by my edited book with Wiendu Nuryanti entitled *Building on Batik* (2000). This book is by no means limited to batik in Indonesia [batik is referred to as a special fabric dyeing technique], though the conference on which it was based was hosted in Indonesia. It raises amongst other things the links between craft and tourism and the importance of the internet, as well as the making of batik as an experiential phenomenon. It also addresses the tension between batik as a sacred artefact and its sale as a commodity and once again Graburn provided a section on his experience among the Inuit in which he noted that souvenirs often serve different demands. On one hand they provide buyers with attractive arts and crafts, while on the other they help to manage the outside world's view of themselves while remaining commercially viable.

At the time of the publication of *Building on Batik* it was clear that it was not just the sale of the product that made money, but the experience of learning about how it was made and even the practice of making an example for one's self. And in that respect the selling of batik knowledge was starting to resemble the practice of gastro-tourism in which you not only consume the food, but learn to make it. Similar observations can be made with regard to agro-tourism and farm to fork eating where you harvest what you later dine on. The important point here is that the experience is very much as important as the product, and that there are many examples of such activities in what we have long characterised as

the creative or cultural economy. In fact, it was the omission of gastronomy from the UK's definition of which sectors comprised the creative economy that was seen as a mistake, not least in view of the emergence of London as one of the world's great gastronomic centres. In fact, I would go one stage further and would include souvenirs too as something that should be considered in terms of the creative industries, but not all aspects for sure and that we should only look at examples of those that demonstrate a level of creativity with the associated connotations of added value.

It is often assumed that souvenirs are products that are designed as such, but this need not be the case. For example, in Egypt leather bound notebooks are popular with local but have caught the eye of tourists and so we have an historic product that is popular with both markets with the added value of buying a locally sourced product. But sometimes these popular local products are deliberately downgraded, presumably to save on costs, as is the case in Uzbekistan where quality knives are made for domestic consumption and lower grade ones that look superficially similar are sold to tourists. The same can be said for crossbows in northern Thailand as producers assume that tourists will never really use them in the way that was originally intended.

The purchase of souvenirs also brings us into the so called zones of 'frontstage' and 'backstage', following Erving Goffman's (1959) widely cited analysis, in which the tourist becomes aware of a specifically constructed front-of-house tourism zone, but detects a back-of-house where reality is thought to exist. Tourists may venture into this zone to experience a greater sense of reality which Cohen has called a 'false back' (Cohen, 1988). Such zones can be seen in umbrella factories in northern Thailand where the shop opens up on to a factory. Umbrellas sales are largely aimed at women, but men can satisfy their need for more 'masculine' products by wondering into the factory to purchase tools from the 'workers', of which there is an abundant supply, the demand having already been anticipated. This author made such a purchase, a pump drill, in Chiang Mai in the 1980s only to see the worker nonchalantly replace it from his stock in a nearby basket once the sale had been realised.

After my two edited volumes came out I learned about the interesting phenomenon of being able to design your own souvenir on-line and then being able to collect it on holiday. There's also been some recent and interesting work on 'selfies' as souvenirs and although these photographs do not directly make money for the retailer or artisan, the photo can be as important as the purchase in terms of experiences, especially if the image is displayed on the maker/vendor's website. The photograph helps to tell the story, to reinforce provenance and is an increasingly important part of experiential tourism. It may also help the artisan/vendor to undertake market research into what tourists' desire without the associated expense. The market research happens empirically through sales as opposed to developing new and costly products without this kind of feedback. The fact that so many touristic experience are published on-line these days provides us with an opportunity to gain some insights into the spending habits and motives of tourists through studying blogs using 'netnography' to ascertain content analysis, though ethical safeguards do need to be observed.

Importance of interpretation

looking at. Chinese tourists in China may be aware of the references to legends and stories symbolized by say paper-cuts, but Western tourists often have no idea what they are looking at. The same applies in reverse and is a pressing question given the importance of outbound tourism from Asia, notably from China. Such may be the gulf in cultural understanding, it may be difficult to convince retailers that tourists simply do not understand what is being sold to them. The cultural divide may not necessarily be that great, the Swedish dala horse being a case in point (Hanefors & Selwyn, 2000). British tourists to Sweden are often mystified at first to see a painted wooden horse for sale, but as they are able to easily look up its history and associated meanings on-line they may well be persuaded to purchase one. In a strange way, products are often well-understood but the context is confused, which is the case with the cuckoo clock which is widely associated with Switzerland, when in fact it originates in the German Black Forest region. Such is the demand for these clocks that souvenirs sellers in Switzerland have given up trying to point out that they are not Swiss and simply sell them alongside their other products.

Another common misconception is that the object that is closely associated with a destination is actually from that area. This is not necessarily the case as souvenirs can easily travel along the hubs and spokes of economic distribution systems. In Bali, for example, crafts are outsourced to islands with cheaper labour costs such as Java, while being retailed as Balinese. Some are designed in Bali, but others may simply be designed and made elsewhere as tourism has made Bali a relatively prosperous province in comparison to other regions. A similar phenomenon can be observed in the USA where the Navaho are strongly associated with certain textiles and exquisite jewellery but where again the actual manufacturing may be outsourced, though the strong Navaho brand is staunchly protected (Hitchcock, 2000).

A related misconception is that the person involved in selling a souvenir is somehow connected culturally to these retail products, but this need not be the case, especially in huge cosmopolitan cities like London where less than half the population are thought to be of British origin. In such contexts it may be hard to define what is meant by ethnonyms such as 'British' as the term 'Londoner' is a readily adaptive category. Also, in place like London it may be easy to see what is intended to be a souvenir, such as a plastic policeman's helmet, but harder to see what actually may be just as much a souvenir but what is seen as luxury product. London, like Paris and Milan, sells lots of luxury goods to tourists and it is often the fact that they actually purchased in London that adds to their allure. The carefully designed receipt that states that was bought in London is as much a souvenir as the item itself.

Interestingly, London sells both multi-cultural and British London at the same time, though rarely in the same place. You can buy Chinese souvenirs, including foodstuffs, in China town, often accompanied by the experience of savouring a Chinese meal. By the same token you can enjoy British afternoon tea at Fortnum and Mason's before going to the elegant shop to stock up on British tea and a variety of other tasty treats. If you are bored with the British and Chinese experience then there is always Banglatown on brick lane where you sample 'Indian' food, which is largely produced by Bangladeshis often of Sylheti origin. Bored of London, then you can go north to Bradford to explore the curry trail and buy products of South Asian origin.

Questions of authenticity

So far, I have not touched much on the subject of 'authenticity' though it was flagged up in three and a half pages in the original *Souvenirs* book of 2000. Given the arguments raised above it has become more difficult to discuss the subject from that vantage point and it may be more worthwhile to talk about branding and associations. That said, an article in the business section of the UK's *Sunday Times* (23rd February 2020) accounted for the relative strength of European luxury brands, notably French ones, as compared with American ones in terms of their associations with heritage and craftsmanship. For sure, European luxury brands do rely heavily on European craft workers and the longevity and back stories of the brands are well told. If one is looking for a business model for somewhere like Lapland, then it would appear that it is real craftsmanship and a genuine heritage that could increase not only the value added but the volume of sales as well. Rather than searching endlessly for authenticity in academic terms, we should perhaps be looking at product quality and its associated heritage, both of which need to be interpreted in ways that increasingly culturally diverse tourists can understand. The experience of purchasing a souvenir, whether it is tangible or intangible, is also part of the attraction, and these experiences can be delivered in a wide variety of ways.

Finally, there always needs to be something for everybody and, much as a cannot see the attraction of plastic dinosaurs, retailers in the museum shops that I know remind me that you simply have to have them as children like nothing better than to spend their limited pocket money on these ubiquitous objects. Of course these items do tend to occur in museums that have associations with dinosaurs, and I do know of alternative items that can be sold just as cheaply. The Horniman Museum, where this discussion began is famous for its stuffed walrus and the museum shop sells some rather attractive cuddly toy walruses alongside inexpensive walrus fridge magnets. I am told that both sell well.

Conclusion

The conference entitled 'Souvenirs 2021' was a welcome reminder that the souvenir topic is wide ranging and culturally and economically important. This paper acts as a kind of link between the much smaller conference held at the Horniman Museum in London (Hitchcock & Teague, 2000) and the larger one, though not just focussing on souvenirs, in Yogyakarta in Indonesia (Hitchcock & Nuryanti, 2000). The papers presented at the conference hosted on-line in Rovaniemi are vast in their scope, but as this author argues the topic is still much larger and worthy of further research. We still do not know the percentage of the holiday budget spent on souvenirs by many cultures, ranging from around 30 % for westerners and about 60 % for some Asian peoples, and what people actually do with their souvenirs when they get home. Circumstantial evidence suggests that there is still an interest in having personalised 'cabinets of curiosities' at home which can be shown to members of the family, as well as guests, serving as stores of memory and topics for discussion. There is also the case for looking more closely at goods being brought as gifts to special events, which often end up being housed in special purpose-built display areas, a case in point being

Marshal Tito's Mausoleum in Belgrade which displays elaborate relay batons presented by young pioneers to the leader of former Yugoslavia, as well as gifts from political leaders of the era. There are many such collections around the world and it would certainly be worth looking at them more closely for what they can tell us about the mind-sets and aspirations of the both the donors and the recipients, a case in point being the vast assemblage acquired over many decades by the Queen of the United Kingdom and the Commonwealth. Are there collections of this kind to be researched in countries that are not currently connected with royalty such as Finland and what kinds of gifts given by envoys from this country with its complex history tell us about the state of this nation and culture over time?

References

- Chard, C. (1999). *Pleasure and Guilt on the Grand Tour: Travel Writing and Imaginative Geography, 1600-1830*. Manchester University Press
- Cohen, E. (1988). Authenticity and commoditization in tourism. *Annals of Tourism Research*, 15(3), 370-386
- Goffman, W. (1959). *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. Doubleday
- Graburn, N.H.H. (2000) Foreword. In M. Hitchcock, M. & K. Teague, (Eds.), *Souvenirs: The material culture of tourism*. Ashgate.
- Hanefors, M & Selwyn, T. (2000). Dalecarlian masques: One souvenir's many voices. In
- Hitchcock, M., & K. Teague, K. (Eds.). *Souvenirs: The material culture of tourism*. Ashgate.
- Hitchcock, M., & Teague, K. (eds) (2000) *Souvenirs: The Material Culture of Tourism*. Aldershot: Ashgate
- Hitchcock, M. (2000) Introduction. In M. Hitchcock, & K. Teague, (Eds.), *Souvenirs: The material culture of tourism*. Ashgate.
- Hitchcock, M., & Nuryanti, W. (Eds.). (2000). *Building on batik: The globalization of a craft community*. Ashgate.
- Horniman Museum, London <https://www.horniman.ac.uk/our-history/> (10/05/2021)
- National Gallery, London. <https://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/paintings/jan-van-eyck-portrait-of-a-man-leal-souvenir> (10/05/2001)
- Oxford University Press. (1973). *Shorter Oxford English Dictionary on Historical Principles*. Oxford University Press
- Pine, B.P., & Gilmore, J.H. (1989). Welcome to the experience economy. *Harvard Business Review* (August) <https://hbr.org/1998/07/welcome-to-the-experience-economy>