

Introduction to Special Issue

Material Culture as a Methodology for the History of Philanthropy

Amanda B. Moniz

It was about eight years ago now when a friend alerted me to a central challenge I would soon be facing. Running into my grad school pal at a conference, I shared the news that I had just been hired as the curator of philanthropy at the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History. "Oh, that's what they're calling it these days," he said. Turns out he presumed that "curator of philanthropy" was a newfangled term for the museum's development—that is, fundraising—professionals. No, I explained, the Smithsonian had added philanthropy as a collecting area and was opening an exhibit, *Giving in America*, on the topic. I was going to be building the new collection and sharing the stories the objects hold. And . . . I was going to have to figure out what exactly that would mean.

Close to a decade old, the philanthropy collection now boasts over two hundred objects telling diverse stories about Americans' experiences giving time and resources, working in or using charitable institutions, and critiquing giving. *Giving in America* has been up since 2016, with hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of people viewing it.¹ And yet I've had countless variations of the conversation I had with my friend. Philanthropy as the focus of a collection and an exhibition continues to surprise many people, from museumgoers to potential object donors to established and emerging museum professionals and just about everyone in between. A big part of that reaction, I have found, stems from thinking about philanthropy in terms of money, rather than in terms of material experiences.

What often surprises people more is to learn that the concept of "philanthropy" has not always implied financial largess. Rather, the expectation that philanthropy has to do primarily with money, and big money at that, is a historical development.

1 On the launching of the Smithsonian's Philanthropy Initiative and the opening of the exhibition, see Lucy Harvey, "The Day a Bunch of Billionaires Dropped by the Smithsonian," *Smithsonian Magazine*, December 9, 2015; Pam Fessler, "A Giving History: Smithsonian Exhibit Showcases Americans' Charitable Acts," *NPR.org*, November 29, 2016.



The National Museum of American History’s *Giving in America* exhibit as seen in 2018. The framework for the section on the right side of the case remains constant, though objects in it rotate. The section on the left changes annually around a particular theme and features Giving Pledge letters related to the theme. (National Museum of American History)

In the United States, before the rise of Gilded Age fortunes, the word “philanthropy” had typically been understood as “love of humanity,” from its original Greek meaning. That feeling might simply lead people to sympathize with the plight of others or it might motivate people to take action to relieve suffering, with the term “active philanthropy” frequently used in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century to distinguish people working especially hard at aiding others. With the rise of great wealth and major benefactors such as Andrew Carnegie, the meaning of the word shifted. Some contested that new, narrower concept, but, in time, in the United States, the new definition stuck.²

Meanwhile, although some historians of charitable activity or fundraising have analyzed objects, scholars of the topic generally have not embraced material culture

² Conrad Edick Wright, *The Transformation of Charity in Postrevolutionary New England* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1992), 7, 120–21; Amanda B. Moniz, *The Empire of Humanity: The American Revolution and the Origins of Humanitarianism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016); Andrew Carnegie’s influential articles on philanthropy, “Wealth” and “The Best Fields for Philanthropy,” can be found on the website of the Carnegie Corporation of New York; Andrea Walton, “Introduction: Women and Philanthropy in Education—A Problem in Conception,” in Walton, ed., *Women and Philanthropy in Education* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005), 1.

expressed through material culture has been fundamental to the development of museums' holdings. Museums were created in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries to help teach through objects, and philanthropy was essential to that project. Donors contributed time and money to create museums. They also gave all manner of goods, from European paintings and American decorative arts to Indigenous materials to railroad technology and everything in between and beyond.⁵ So, philanthropy—including the gifts of wealthy financial benefactors, everyday object donors, and volunteer docents—has long supported and shaped public history. Now the lens is flipped to public history examining the history of philanthropy.

Along with the National Museum of American History, other public history institutions have turned attention to the history of philanthropy. In 2019, the Kenneth Spencer Research Library of the University of Kansas featured an exhibition on its patrons, *Meet the Spencers: A Marriage of Arts and Sciences*. Beginning also in 2019 and running until 2022, the Indiana Historical Society featured an exhibition on the pioneering late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century African American businesswoman and philanthropist Madam C. J. Walker. New York's Jewish Museum mounted an exhibition in 2023 exploring the Iraqi Jewish Sassoon family, including their art patronage and philanthropy. In addition, philanthropic institutions are engaging audiences with public history resources or through the opening of galleries. In the United States, the Rockefeller Archives Center has created educational resources and an online exhibit. The Ford Foundation's new headquarters includes an art gallery focused on social justice, and the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation has a discovery center hosting exhibitions about the foundation's work. Meanwhile, London boasts the Foundling Museum, examining the history of the Foundling Hospital through the charity's art and artifacts.

Moreover, philanthropy has figured significantly in public conversation in recent years. Newspapers and bestselling books have examined debates over the power of major benefactors and concerns about tainted money.⁶ Meanwhile, even

5 On the creation of American and European museums in the nineteenth and twentieth century and the role of philanthropy, see, among others, David Kite Allison and Hannah L. C. Peterson, *Exhibiting America: The Smithsonian's National History Museum, 1881–2018* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Scholarly Press, 2021); Thomas Adam, *Buying Respectability: Philanthropy and Urban Society in Transnational Perspective, 1840s to 1930s* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2009); Victoria H. Cummins, "Black Clubwomen and the Promotion of the Visual Arts in Early Twentieth-Century Texas," *Southwestern Historical Quarterly* 119, no. 1 (July 2015): 1–22; Steven Lubar, *Inside the Lost Museum: Curating, Past and Present* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2017); Kathleen McCarthy, *Women's Culture: American Philanthropy and Art, 1830–1930* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991); Tiya Miles, *All that She Carried: The Journey of Ashley's Sack, a Black Family's Keepsake* (New York: Random House, 2021); on the influence of philanthropist Paul Allen on the recent creation of a museum, see Trevor F. Anthony, "Busy Being Born: A Brief History of the Museum of Pop Culture," *The Public Historian* 45, no. 4 (November 2023): 82–105.

6 Examples include Patrick Radden Keefe, *Empire of Pain: The Secret History of the Sackler Dynasty* (New York: Doubleday, 2021); Jane Mayer, *Dark Money: The Hidden History of the Billionaires Behind the Rise of the Radical Right* (New York: Penguin Random House, 2016); *The Washington Post* editorial board, "The Failed Philanthropy of Sam Bankman-Fried," *The Washington Post*, October 16, 2023.

as experts in the field express concern about declining American giving, women and people of color in particular have been reclaiming a broader understanding of “philanthropist,” rooted in the concept of “love of humanity” familiar to earlier eras. This diffuse yet persistent public interest in the topic, then, prompts various questions for both the fields of public history and the history of philanthropy.

Building on a generative roundtable at the 2022 American Historical Association’s annual meeting, this special issue considers the opportunities and challenges of studying, curating, and teaching the history of philanthropy through material culture with a focus on giving and social activism in Britain, Mexico, and the United States. It addresses questions including: What counts as a “philanthropy object”? How does approaching the history of philanthropy from the perspective of material culture change or enrich that history? How do students or museumgoers relate to these objects? What are the obstacles to finding these objects in museums’ catalogs? And what are the opportunities for training students in public history?

The authors answer these questions with investigations of material experiences over a broad geographic and temporal range. They remind us that philanthropy is not unique to the United States, nor is it a product of the Gilded Age. Moreover, they have identified a great range of material culture, along with interpretative possibilities and ethical issues in studying, exhibiting, or collecting these objects. Individually and as a whole, the authors illuminate the deep emotional responses students, scholars, museumgoers, and other audiences have to the object-based explorations of experiences of generosity, shared humanity, and the power dynamics of giving.

What is so compelling to me about that finding is that it recurs among a range of audiences encountering such a wide array of objects. In other words, the authors conclude that an unfamiliar, seemingly niche field of the history of philanthropy in all its complexity can be highly accessible through objects. I have observed that among visitors to *Giving in America*. Museumgoers passing the exhibition will stop, point to an object such as a UNICEF trick-or-treat collection box or a March of Dimes collecting can and exclaim, “I did that” or “Grandma collected for that.” People see themselves and their families in this history and share stories with one another spurred by the objects. Yet the articles also point out that doing this work with students or museumgoers often requires innovation and, they suggest, may require slowing down museumgoers’ consideration of particular objects.

In the first article, Georgina Brewis elaborates on her creative approaches to teaching the history of British philanthropy at University College London. To help students recognize the centrality of ordinary people to making change through voluntary action in twentieth-century Britain, Brewis amassed “a curated teaching collection” of ordinary objects from twentieth-century British charities. Students can touch and examine the objects in the classroom, asking questions that textual sources might not raise, and they then pursue research projects on the items. While these artifacts of mass fundraising efforts were once ubiquitous, they are often not collected by museums or cataloged as related to charity. Brewis’s teaching collection filled the gap. Explaining the steps in building it and some of the practical

challenges of using it, Brewis also highlights its great value in the classroom. Students, she notes, often have emotional responses to objects that facilitate learning from them. Moreover, examining fundraising objects from earlier eras has led her students to confront the issue of endurance of social problems.

Like Brewis, Sarah Weickel notes the limitations of museum catalogues for finding philanthropy objects and argues for a broad approach to defining what a philanthropy object is. Weickel focuses on a late nineteenth-century Nevada mining community to ask us to think in new ways about familiar or seemingly straightforward objects in museum collections—from decorative arts pieces to mining apparatus—to understand the labor and philanthropy stories behind them. Assessing existing collections such as a silver coffee set or miner’s candlestick through the lens of philanthropy, she explains, broadens the range of philanthropy objects to include those that created the conditions that led to a philanthropic response. The history of philanthropy, then, starts with inequality or human suffering, not with giving, Weickel insists. As she suggests, engaging museumgoers in exploring the philanthropy stories behind those objects will require placing them in conversation with other sources that more quickly signal that philanthropy is part of the story they are about to encounter.

Hilary Green turns our attention to photographs as objects that illuminate the work of fundraising for Black education in the Reconstruction era. Like Brewis, despite the two scholars being unbeknownst to one another until recently, Green assembled a curated history of a philanthropy teaching collection, in her case focused on the photographic postcards sold to raise funds for Black education in the late nineteenth-century United States. Philanthropic organizations, Green explains, turned to photography as a fundraising strategy in the Civil War, and then Black higher educational institutions built on that practice by selling photography and other souvenirs featuring their choirs. Using the resonant term “consumer-philanthropists,” Green emphasizes how examining the postcards as objects highlights for her students nineteenth-century innovations in fundraising and the role of everyday philanthropy in a period better known for robber baron benefactors. The opportunity to engage closely with the postcards has also prompted her students in courses exploring abolition and emancipation to ask questions about consent and resistance in humanitarian photography—questions that endure today in a world where we are saturated with images of suffering from philanthropic organizations.

In the fourth article, Philippa Koch makes the case for a different sort of material—archival records, specifically a nineteenth-century orphanage’s records of relinquishment—as philanthropy objects. Centering a theme touched on by all the authors, Koch plumbs the question of how people respond emotionally to philanthropy objects through a moving discussion of her own engagement with the records of relinquishment, that is, the pieces of paper by which parents or guardians gave up custody of their daughters to the Washington Female Orphan Asylum. In her reflection, Koch points to the norms of archives where historians encounter documents and her emotional response in that space. She therefore

encourages public historians to consider how museum visitors experience emotions to objects in different museums. Would visitors have different responses to an exhibition on the history of philanthropy at the mid-century modern National Museum of American History versus at the former mansion of Andrew Carnegie, now the Cooper Hewitt, Smithsonian Design Museum?

Along with Koch and Weicksel, Jessica Nelson considers philanthropy's impact on the built environment and the repurposing of charitable institutions, often into cultural spaces, as she explores an array of objects used in the public performance of philanthropy in seventeenth- to nineteenth-century Oaxaca, Mexico. Drawing on Iberian Roman Catholic traditions and Indigenous Catholicism, the city supported a range of charitable endeavors including a charitable fund for dowries for poor girls and a convent for Indigenous Catholic nuns. Each, much like the philanthropic pursuits discussed by the other authors, involved public displays of beneficence, with these events relying on objects as essential to enacting generosity. The *obra pía* for dowries required the proper use of objects to legitimate the process of selection during an annual ceremony. The ceremony even shaped the soundscape, with the mandatory ringing of a bell. Today the dowry fund, pursued so publicly in its day, has been largely forgotten. Meanwhile, the former convent is now used as a cultural center. The building itself is the object, hidden in plain sight, with a faint but enduring public memory of the earlier history of the institution offering opportunities to engage visitors.

In the final article, Cheryl Ellenwood and Ray Foxworth tackle an ethical issue many museums are grappling with today: namely, the history of how collections came into being. Examining the Nez Perce Wetxuuwíitin Collection, Ellenwood and Foxworth probe the relationship between the creation of museums and the material culture of philanthropy. Many objects have philanthropy stories attached to them, even if on their face they do not seem to be about philanthropy. In the case of the Wetxuuwíitin Collection, charitable gifts enabled the journey of Nez Perce cultural property from its acquisition by a nineteenth-century white Protestant missionary to its gift to Oberlin College to its eventual return to the Nez Perce, funded by Indigenous contributions. Although all the authors explore the complexity of philanthropy, Ellenwood and Foxworth's examination of the taking of the Nez Perce material culture especially challenges us to consider the pain that giving can cause. They also ask us to think about Native American material culture as Indigenous data—objects that hold cultural knowledge—that should be governed by the norms of the international Indigenous Data Sovereignty movement. (The Smithsonian has been confronting these and related issues, and under the leadership of Secretary Lonnie G. Bunch III, it has adopted a policy of ethical returns including enhanced efforts to return human remains.⁷)

7 Matt Stevens, "In a Nod to Changing Norms, the Smithsonian Adopts Policy on Ethical Returns," *The New York Times*, May 3, 2022; Ellen Wexler, "The Smithsonian's Human Remains Task Force Calls for New Repatriation Policies," *Smithsonian Magazine*, February 22, 2024.

As the history of the Wetxuuwíitin Collection shows, particular objects may have layers of philanthropic action, often debated at the time or since, behind them. The challenge and the opportunity for public history institutions is to find strategies to engage visitors in exploring these varying perspectives of objects that may not read obviously as being about giving at all. How will visitors make meaning of the philanthropy stories of these objects? As Benjamin Filene has explained, personal connection and emotional engagement are key to how museumgoers make meaning of the exhibits they encounter.⁸ Can we provide opportunities for the sort of emotional engagement Koch had with the Washington Female Orphan Asylum records, that Green's students had with Black educational fundraising postcards, and that Brewis's students had with their opportunities for extended encounters and careful looking at twentieth-century British voluntary association materials? What strategies should we try to encourage that sort of engagement, especially if we hope visitors consider the multiple, complex, and sometimes painful stories objects hold, particularly when people often relate to the stories of technical accomplishment that they see in objects?

As I think about doing this work, I find myself wrestling with my disciplinary training, which inclines me toward a dispassionate and critical emphasis on the power dynamics of philanthropy, and my on-the-job growth as a public historian, which has attuned to me to the feelings that objects and their stories evoke. At the National Museum of American History, I have worked with a diverse group of interns, fellows, contractors, and staff, including on projects focused on the history of African American philanthropy and on the relationship between Latino/a philanthropy and war. I have taught public history master's students and given tours to undergraduate students in courses focused on public history and on cultural philanthropy. I have also interacted with the dozens of people who have donated objects to the collection. In my experience, most people bring a positive view of philanthropy to their encounters with the exhibition and the collection. They are pleased to have their own or their communities' recent or historical contributions to supporting others recognized. They value the opportunities to help people understand how their forebearers challenged discrimination or inequality through philanthropic giving to make change. But folks also bring a generous spirit and are quick to value stories about giving by people unlike themselves. I have been influenced by the many people who have told me and, even more powerfully, shown me as their faces light up that the history of humane activity matters. These responses highlight the importance of putting diverse objects in conversation with one another to bring out multiple perspectives and, yes, the complexity of power exercised through philanthropy. Even more, though, I have come to appreciate the

8 Benjamin Filene, "The Why, What, and How of the Best Storytelling in Museum Exhibits" in *Storytelling in Museums*, ed. Adina Langer (Blue Ridge Summit: American Alliance of Museums), 3–12, 4.



This cardboard box in the National Museum of American History's philanthropy collection tells the story of a gift of personal protective equipment during the Covid-19 pandemic by a church in western China to a church in Washington, DC. For one visitor, the box illuminated the power of objects in exploring the history of giving. (National Museum of American History)

importance of offering opportunities for slower engagement with the material culture of philanthropy.

Those opportunities for slower consideration have often come when I give visitors tours of the philanthropy collection in storage. In these situations, I typically point out specific objects because I think they will be meaningful to the visitors, and other objects that visitors notice and ask about. As we stand together looking and talking, people will usually and very obviously light up as they learn the stories of particular things. In these cases, unlike what I have observed at *Giving in America*, the objects that prompt this emotional engagement are often *not* related to something the person has direct personal or family experience with. The objects appeal for different reasons. For one visitor, it was cardboard boxes that had held personal protective equipment donated by a church in China to a church in Washington, DC, during the COVID-19 pandemic. The ordinariness of the boxes sparked an aha moment for my guest about the particular story and the power of everyday objects to tell it. That slower looking and the opportunity to provide more information than a fifty-word label allows suggests that in *Giving in America*, we may want to consider combining approaches that explicitly engage the family story, sharing experiences so many visitors already have with the

“think with me” approach to ask visitors to consider why a museum collected an object.⁹

Philanthropy as the focus of a museum collection and exhibition may still surprise people. Yet as countless visitors and all the authors in this special issue reveal, opportunities abound to explore moving stories through the material culture of philanthropy. Probing *what* counts as philanthropy objects and what experiences those objects help us uncover will enrich today’s public and scholarly conversations about *who* counts as a philanthropist. The time is ripe for thoughtful consideration of what we can learn about giving by considering the stuff of its lived experience.

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Amanda B. Moniz is the David M. Rubenstein Curator of Philanthropy at the Smithsonian’s National Museum of American History. She received her PhD from the University of Michigan in 2008 and then held a Cassius Marcellus Clay Postdoctoral Fellowship at Yale University. Her book, *From Empire to Humanity: The American Revolution and the Origins of Humanitarianism* (Oxford University Press, 2016), was awarded ARNOVA’s inaugural Peter Dobkin Hall History of Philanthropy Book Prize. Her work involves curating a long-term exhibit, *Giving in America*, and building the Smithsonian’s collection of objects telling stories about the diverse cultures and practices of Americans’ experiences with philanthropy. She is currently writing a biography of Isabella Graham, the Scottish immigrant widow who transformed philanthropy in early-national New York City.

9 Filene, “The Why, What, and How of the Best Storytelling in Museum Exhibits,” 9–10.