

OBJECTS OF WONDER

*Three contributors share
their object stories.*



CHITRA GANESH

I've had this holographic portrait for decades, having brought it back to the US with me from one of my frequent trips to India as a young adult. It depicts the Buddha and the Dalit scholar B. R. Ambedkar, who became independent India's first Minister of Law and Justice. The iconic and the everyday were constantly melded in similar types of craft objects in my childhood: embedded in our family altar, wall calendars of local South Asian businesses, fridge magnets, or car decorations—all of which seamlessly fuse the sacred and the quotidian.

This object is subversive because it challenges casteism, which is now being critiqued as a fundamental tenet of organized Hinduism and Hindu nationalism in India. The intertwined images of the Buddha and Dr. Ambedkar, a member of a so-called “untouchable” caste, prohibited from entering temples and sharing water with caste Hindus, comes from the anti-caste movement in India. Dr. Ambedkar advocated for a rejection of caste Hinduism in India and inspired millions of people from the untouchable castes to convert to Buddhism and Islam, both of which were seen as religious frameworks based in social equality.

The portrait also speaks to the shape-shifting nature of icons, and to print culture's vital role in revolutionary

movements, like the proliferation of printed religious icons in anti-colonial India, or Emory Douglas' iconic posters made during Black Power movements of the 1960s and '70s. Concurrent with the growing recognition of systemic racism in America, this object animates a conversation and reckoning around caste in India today—including how the country was built by Dalit labor and exploitation, and how those who are not caste Hindus, whether they are Dalit or indigenous Adivasi, continue to endure brutal discrimination, repression, and lack of basic resources in the 21st century.

Often when people imagine craft objects from South Asia, they conjure something ancient, handmade, and singular, which infers an aura of authenticity, an attitude that reflects colonial impulses behind object collection and acquisition. I'm hoping the inclusion of mass-produced objects in contemporary discourses of craft may contribute to reframing long-held conceptions of craft and authenticity.

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Chitra Ganesh's drawing-based practice engages with narrative representations of femininity, sexuality, and power typically absent from canons of literature and art. Her work has been exhibited widely in the United States and across Europe and South Asia, and her installation *A city will share her secrets if you know how to ask* is currently on view at the Leslie-Lohman Museum of Art through June 1, 2022.

MARIAN BANTJES

This carpet was made by Bedouins—a nomadic tribe of North Africa. My then-husband and I bought it in Luxor, Egypt, in 1989. We visited the carpet shop three times and were served tea as we viewed many, many carpets. Past the tourist crap, past the good tourist pieces, past the contemporary ones, we went further and further into the depths of the shop until we found this carpet and one other we loved. The one pictured here was older and was made with all natural dyes, while the other was bigger but included some artificial dyes.

The sellers hung the older rug on a wall and performed a light trick on it: a whole rack of lights of different temperatures, which they switched to show us how the colors in the carpet changed. While it's obvious that colors change under different lighting conditions, this was part of the magic of the sale—a three-day journey of discovery and persuasion, with tales being spun for us over more tea as we began the long process of haggling over the price. We laughed over the strange pleasure of it all and still believe we got two exceptional carpets.

My ex kept the bigger one, and this smaller, older carpet has hung in my home for decades now. It fills me with wonder over its history: its time spent in a nomad's tent; its time spent in a dusty shop; the memories it holds of travels with my ex-husband; and yes, how the colors change under different light conditions. The patterns are inconsistent and my eyes wander through them, thinking about meaning and mistake; whose hands made them and what they thought about in the making. I see it every day but never take it for granted, because although I own it, it has never felt really like mine. It belongs to a dwindling tribe on the other side of the world, in the desert sand.

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Marian Bantjes is a Canadian graphic artist, designer, and writer. Her work, while variable in style, is usually rationally ornamental and imaginative. She has written (and designed) two books: *I Wonder* (2010, 2018) and *Pretty Pictures* (2013), both published by Thames & Hudson.





PRESTON SINGLETERARY

Bill Reid's *The Spirit of Haida Gwaii, The Jade Canoe* is a breathtaking piece, sculpted in clay in the late 1980s and cast in bronze in 1993. Inspired by myths from the northwest coast of North America, the monumental sculpture (13 feet tall, 20 feet long, and 11.5 feet wide) employs the totemic carving style of the Haida Nation of British Columbia, Canada. For me it instills a sense of wonder, as the figures in it nearly appear to be animated.

Thirteen passengers are riding in the canoe. Eagle and Raven represent the main moieties of the tribe. Several subclans are depicted, such as Bear, Wolf, Frog, and Beaver, accompanied by anthropomorphic representations of Mouse Woman and Dogfish Woman. A human figure, described by Reid as the “ancient reluctant conscript,” is paddling dutifully, while a chief or shaman figure sits at the center.

The group is relying on the navigation of Raven, considered the Trickster, who is steering the boat to who knows

where. The expressions of the figures range from resolute, surprised, or curious to menacing, biting, swallowing, or disgorging. This might reflect an undisclosed rivalry between clans or projected dominance from an actual historical dispute.

In any case, this piece is a testament to the enduring northwest coastal culture and takes its rightful place in the contemporary art world, where Native or Indigenous art has largely been excluded.

It is also suggestive of a goal of mine to expand Indigenous art through the use of nontraditional materials. Developing knowledge and mastery of newer materials not heretofore associated with traditional arts brings opportunities to render and preserve the ancient codes and symbols of the land in exciting new ways.

♦ Preston Singletary's art has become synonymous with the relationship between European glassblowing traditions and Northwest Native art. His artworks are included in museum collections such as The British Museum, The Museum of Fine Arts, Corning Museum of Glass, and the Smithsonian Institution.