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## Crafted Objects Carry Meaning

## Les objets confectionnés sont porteurs de signification

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### Résumé de l'article

Cet article s'intéresse aux différents aspects contributifs au parcours ou à l'histoire de vie d'un objet confectionné. Dans le cas de tels objets, cela inclut l'origine des matériaux, le lien entre l'artisan et le récit historique des pratiques d'artisanat. L'histoire des échantillons crochétés est rapportée par le biais de la poésie et de récits écrits à caractère visuel, dans le but de mettre en évidence les agents dynamiques de la « création » d'objets, sans oublier la contribution potentielle de résultats non souhaités à l'artisanat et à l'apprentissage.

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# Crafted Objects Carry Meaning

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## Abstract

This article delves into the aspects which contribute to the creation of an object's itinerary or life story. In the case for crafted objects this includes material history, maker-object relationships, and the historical narratives surrounding craft practices. The story of crochet samples is related through visual life writing and poetry, to highlight the agents active in the 'creation' of objects, as well as the pedagogical potential of undesirable outcomes within craft making and learning.

**Keywords:** Craft; Material; Human-Object Relationships; Poetry.

The purpose of this inquiry is to consider the journey of crafted things, both as material and as object, questioning what kind of meaning crafted objects can carry and embody throughout their journey. Additionally, probing who, what, when and where informs the various meanings taken on by objects. Using objects that act as early evidence of craft learning, crochet samples, to investigate these questions, I examine the various roles these objects have transitioned, and how history has informed their existence, as well as speculate about their future(s). According to the Oxford Centre for Life Writing "life-writing involves, and goes beyond, biography. It encompasses everything from the complete life to the day-in-the-life, from the fictional to the factional. It embraces the lives of objects and institutions as well as the lives of individuals, families and group" (n.d.). I chose to echo journaling or diary entry as a form of life writing; to reflect on how the material I have chosen to highlight came to me, and what contributed to it becoming an object. This paired with a poetic inquiry from the perspective of these crochet objects, contributes to the generation of their object itinerary. Furthermore, I look towards new materialism when considering the agency of objects, the origin of the material, and human-object relationships. Garber (2019) posits that "new materialism is a theoretical integration of materiality as it affects people, systems, and things, with our understanding of nature, society, and subjectivity" (p.9). I intend to recognize how these effects become meaning.

## Circling back: The prologue

The story of these crochet samples does not start as an object, but rather as a material. The wool used to make these objects arrived in a kit, picked up on the Concordia University campus in Montreal, Quebec, in September 2020, at the height of the Covid-19 pandemic. It's not clear when or who put this kit together, but it was distributed as a part of a distance learning course, *Introduction to fibers and materials practices*. Labelled as 2 ply *Québécoise* wool, I know this because of the material catalogue so conveniently attached to my kit (See Figure 1). This wool is item 14, in the colour Gris Foncé 78, from [Maurice Brassard Fils Inc.](#) a small family yarn business in Plessisville, Quebec, located about an hour from Quebec City. While I can only make educated guesses as to how this wool came to be, of course I know it must have been sheared off the back of a sheep, therefore it started as fleece. However, I do not know whose

fleece, and have no way of knowing the sheep who gifted me this lovely fiber (I would like to extend my thanks regardless, to the sheep, and the land which houses and feeds it). I also know that this yarn must have been processed and dyed at some point in order for it to take on its rich grey colour, and eventually spun into the skein that arrived as part of my kit. Again, I have little knowledge of the specifics about the processes and people involved in dyeing and spinning the specific skein that eventually came into my possession. However, I assume these processes to have taken place.

**Figure 1**

*Maurice Brassard material catalogue*

<div style="text-align: center;">  </div>					
<div style="text-align: center;"> 1573 Savoie, C.P.4, Plessisville Qc G6L 2Y6  Tél: 819-362-2408 / Fax: 819-362-2045 / www.mbrassard.com / diane@nbrassard.com </div>					
Item 14					
2 brins 32 couleurs 100% laine 198 mètres (217 vgs) par écheveau 100 grammes		<b>Québécoise</b>		2 ply 32 colors 100% wool 198 meters (217 yds) per skein 100 grams	
Naturel 92		Rouille 81		Rose 51	
Blanchi 90		Brique 84		Rouge 54	
Gris 72		Bleu Pâle 40		Cardinal 53	
Gris Moyen 74		Bleu 41		Rouge Foncé 55	
Gris Foncé 78		Royal 44		Rouge Vin 28	
Gris / Blanc 97		Vert 34		Orange 14	
Noir 99		Vert 38		Marine 48	

At this point, I will skip to when material became object. Trying to recount exactly how that happened is a bit more challenging, given these samples are records of learning, of trial and error, and by some definition, failure. In making these objects, I was attempting very rudimentary crochet processes for the first time; like creating a slip knot to cast off my hook, chaining, and eventually attempting swatches of single crochet (Figure 2), and double crochet

(Figure 3). However, I will never know exactly how these objects came to be, although I took on the role of maker, I was not the only active agent in making, humans are rarely the sole contributor to artwork, as many other factors influence the process. When discussing distributive agency as understood in new materialism, Hood and Kraehe (2017) state that “artmaking is always a co-creative practice. It is always a collective action between animate and inanimate things” (p.35). Upon reflection, I wonder if the wool had its own ideas for how the samples would turn out. I can see with a better trained eye for crochet that I was not carrying out these stitches the same as I know them today. Single crochet involves inserting your hook into both loops of a stitch, yarning over and pulling up a loop, and then yarning over and pulling through both loops on your hook. Double crochet conversely involves yarning over before inserting your hook into both loops of the stitch, yarning over and pulling up a loop after inserting, yarning over again and pulling through two loops on your hook, and finally yarning over and pulling through the last two loops on your hook - resulting in a taller stitch. I can see now that stitches were added, dropped, or simply not carried out as they should have been for them to be considered single or double crochet. My swatches, particularly the attempt at single crochet, have more of a knitted texture. This is likely due to some accidental slip stitching, which occurs when inserting your hook into a stitch, yarning over, and pulling through the stitch as well as the active loop on your hook. Ultimately, I feel that although I may now be able to pick apart these swatches and attempt to identify every misstep in order to recreate them, these swatches still cannot be replicated. At least not in a way that authentically embodies the learning process, or captures the moment and conditions for which they were originally created within.

**Figure 2**

*Single crochet sample*



**Figure 3**

*Double crochet sample*



Before we continue, it should be noted that I now consider these samples to be separate objects from the wool which they are made of, given that they only used a small portion of the wool which made up the skein. The remaining wool still exists amongst the chaos that is my material stash, waiting to be used. I suppose that means this is only one part of the story of this material, but I think this speaks to the nature of object itineraries, and the move away from linear understandings and biographies of objects. Bauer (2019) summarises this so eloquently when saying that “itineraries are open-ended and multidirectional, and they include elements, fragments, transformations, and intersections with other itineraries and lines” (p.343). Therefore, this wool has the potential to be included in the stories of many other objects, objects whose itineraries will at one point or another overlap with my crochet samples, if only briefly.

### **It's alive! Crochet that speaks for itself**

The role of these samples as ‘completed’ objects and a part of my life, have gone through many transitions themselves. They started as shameful things, they represented defeat, lack of ability and failure in my mind as a maker. My first go at learning to crochet left me discouraged, despite the extra challenging circumstances of trying to learn to crochet via video conferencing and online learning. I felt defeated in my very first attempts. It was only several months later that I felt I properly grasped the practice and became confident enough to start busting out projects. This got the attention of friends and family. They wanted to join in on the fun, and so began my journey of teaching crochet. This is where my samples gained new meaning, as I watched my first students (my friends and family) learn to crochet and experience the same struggles that I did. I would tell them just how lost I was when I started, but that I became more confident with practice and learning alongside other experienced crocheters. They of course didn’t believe me, unable to see past their own feelings of defeat. Here my samples became the perfect pedagogical tool, living proof of the learning process. In discussing amateur craft, Page and Thorsteinsson (2019) assert that “the skills of a true craftsman are built on failure, which not only improves understanding of the materials and process but encourages self-improvement” (p. 3). I would argue that this desire for self-improvement acts as a motivational factor for many craft makers, motivating makers to not only reach their final product but also to grow more confident and well-versed in the process. This was certainly the case for me, and I feel that my crochet samples and the process of creating them, represent just that.

While exploring these samples through poetry, reflecting on their various functions and identities, (past, present, and future), I came up with the following:

What is my worth if I don’t know who I am, or how I was made?  
I’m lopsided,  
inconsistent,  
mishappen,  
and irregular.

Am I meant to be tucked away in a drawer and ignored,  
taken apart and repurposed,  
or thrown away and forgotten?

Am I an object of ridicule,  
of shame,  
or of failure?

Maybe my worth is in my difference,  
I am unique,  
I cannot be recreated,  
and I redefine the rules.

I can be utilized to teach,  
to learn,  
and to inspire.

I am worth holding onto,  
I am of purpose,  
and I am a part of the story.

I know where I come from,  
and what I am made of,  
I am made of wool,  
of fleece off the back,  
or maybe the tummy of a sheep?

I was harvested,  
spun,  
dyed,  
and sent off to be used.

I could have been woven,  
knit,  
crocheted,  
even felted.

I still could be.

I can be taken apart,  
unravelling,  
reused,  
and repurposed.

I am not only what I appear to be,  
I am pliable,  
and I am ever-changing.

These crochet samples represent some hope in the learning process, and evidence that it is ok to make mistakes. Failure is a very important part of the learning process; it goes hand and hand with risk taking and experimentation. In fact, some mistakes even lead to interesting results. These mistakes are what remind us of the human and intimate qualities of craft. Frayed edges, extra stitches, and unwoven threads all point to the presence of the human maker. The handmade quality of things is an important aspect of crafted objects and points to the human-object relationship. Turney (2012) expands on this suggesting that “the crafted object bears the imprint of the maker, not merely as craftspeople would suggest the maker’s hand, but of the maker’s being” (p.305), even going on to propose that touch is embedded within knitted/ crafted objects (Turney, 2012). Yet another way objects carry and transfer meaning is from their maker.

### **Pasts and futures**

It’s important to understand that objects can also carry meaning or have meaning imposed onto them from outside their ‘lifetime’. Not only does this speak to the non-linear journey of things, but it also helps to draw out important historical, social, and cultural connections. When thinking about this idea in relation to my crochet objects, the concept of the sample comes to mind. Samples within craft practices are most commonly associated with the Victorian era, where they were understood to be a pedagogical exercise for women and girls to learn and refine their needlework – which included lace making and crochet (See Figure 4). Although Victorian samplers are the most commonly referenced in western craft scholarship, needlework samplers appeared as early as the 1400s across a much more expansive range of regions including Egypt, Germany, Turkey and more (Victoria and Albert Museum, n.d.). [The Victoria and Albert Museum](#) houses over 700 global examples of samplers, some dating back to the 14-/15th century. Although one might want to inquire as why and how they came to acquire these for their collection.

My crochet objects emerged from this historical practice, in fact, much of my early craft engagement has. Contemporarily, samplers are still commonly used for craft learning, although the concept has moved beyond needlework and has been appropriated across a whole host of craft practices. Within crochet, samples are still most commonly utilized at the beginning of the learning process; to practice different crochet stitches, experiment with hook sizes and materials, or to gauge size for example (See Figure 5 and 6). Samples act as a more accessible entry point for many craft learners today as they only require a small amount of material and a much shorter time commitment. This also allowed them to penetrate the do-it-yourself (DIY) culture. We see images of samples all over Pinterest and Instagram, often accompanied by step-by-step instructions which allows individuals to take craft making and learning into their own hands. Flower (2016) states that “the earliest samplers were spaces to experiment with stitches and repositories for visual motifs, their eighteenth-century counterparts became pedagogical activities” (p.303). Although samples are now taken up across many different contexts and cultures, as objects they still carry many of the same connotations that historical women’s work did, with implications of domesticity, labour, leisure, oppression, and expression to name a few. Interestingly enough, Flower (2016) also draws connections between samplers and life-writing, given that “the hallmark feature of the disparate sub-genres of life-writing is the representation of the narrating ‘I’ as both subject and object” (p.305).



**Figure 4**

*Crochet corner sample, England 1897, maker labeled as 'Mrs. Tweedie' (Victoria and Albert Museum, n.d.)*



Other relevant object and material considerations include the history of wool production and consumption. Wool can be traced back to Mesopotamia. There are mentions of it in religious texts, and there are thriving wool industries worldwide. This points to the abundance of possible links between these crochet objects and concepts beyond their 'lifetime'. However, given that this wool originates from Quebec, more specific histories of industrial and domestic wool industries come to mind in relation to these crochet objects. Wool production in Quebec makes considerable connections with colonialism, gendered labour, and economic expansion.

In Quebec City and region, the production of cloth in the colonial periods (1660-1840) was shared by Canadian countrywomen using homespun and imported material and urban artisans of mainly British origin working with imported fabric. Although the cultivation of flax and hemp and the care of sheep were shared by men, spinning and weaving were, from at least the late seventeenth century, considered woman's work (Ruddel, 1983, p.96).



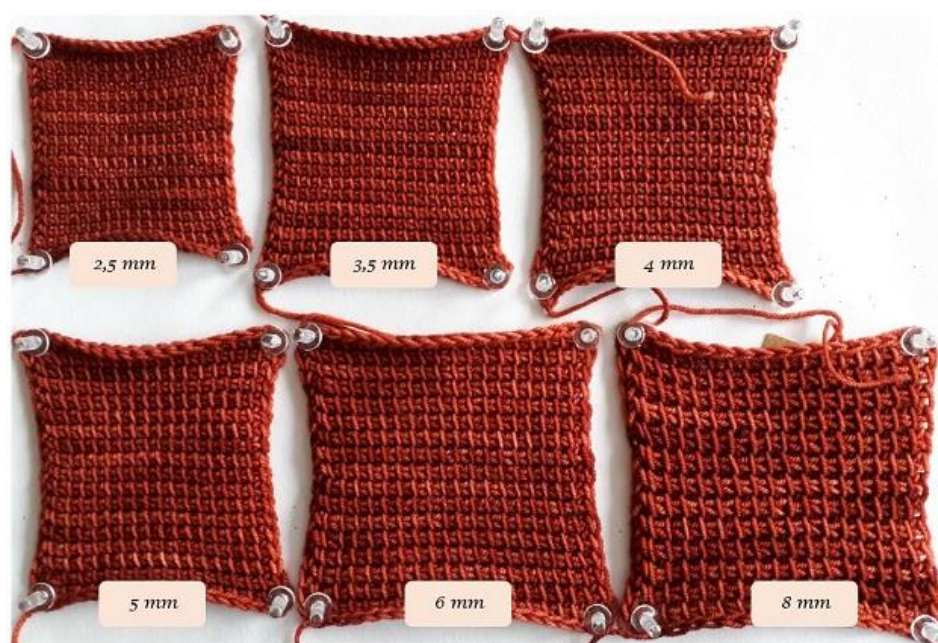
Many of these historical themes related to wool remain relevant today as we continue to experience the consequences of settler colonialism, but they have also perhaps created ripple effects in communities of rural craft, affecting the survival of local craft industries.

The severe reduction in commercial relations between France and Quebec following the British takeover of the colony, combined with the difficulty francophone tailors and merchants had in trading with British textile suppliers, resulted in the disappearance of many of the French-speaking merchants and artisans in Quebec (Ruddel, 1983, p.96).

When probing these connections established in the past, I cannot help but think about what connections to the future these crochet objects will inevitably make as well.

## Figure 5

*Samples in Tunisian Crochet (Rachel Henri, 2019)*



## Weaving in the ends

Perhaps the next step in my learning is to bridge the knowledge gaps in the story of these objects and the material which they are made of. Four years have elapsed since the creation of these crochet samples. In this time, I have been able to experiment with hand spinning and natural dyeing, and I have slowly begun to gain more understanding about the steps which could have been taken to process the wool that I used to crochet my samples. My curiosity of these processes, and how they inform the life of objects, continues to shape how I interact with craft on a daily basis. I find myself and other craft makers around me growing more and more conscious

of how we source our materials. Not only to lower environmental impact but also because there is more challenge in buying old cotton bed sheets second hand and turning them into a garment, or collecting wool leftovers from old projects to assemble something new. Knowing that objects and materials have lived and accumulated meaning from other people, places and things, makes them all the more cherished when they arrive at a new maker. I feel retracing the steps of these crocheted objects now permeates my thinking about the craft process, as well as the final product. Much of my personal practice has and continues to rely on samples as an entry point to new materials, tools and techniques; my drawers prove to be a small personal archive of these pedagogical experiments, each of these being equally ripe for the same investigation that these crochet samples have undergone. I feel I am now more aware of just how many possibilities there are for objects and materials to be transformed at every step of their lives. This is a lesson I intend to pass along to all of my learners, because I think it not only teaches a sense of resourcefulness, but it also lessens the pressure of succeeding on your first go at learning a new craft. Understanding how to embrace failure, and work with objects and materials rather than feel like they are working against you invites more risk taking and playfulness in craft teaching and learning. Encouraging learners to create samples achieves this, and I believe that it is highly applicable to all forms of creative teaching and learning. The concept of samples just becomes more abstract depending on the discipline.

Returning to my initial query of what kinds of meaning crafted things can carry, I feel it appropriate to answer my question with another; what kinds of meaning can't they carry? The more I engage with craft, the more I am convinced of its expansiveness. Often, when explaining my interest in craft to others, I find myself describing craft as elusive. That is to say that it cannot be defined or boiled down to an easily digestible thing because ultimately craft is everything. Therefore, crafted objects carry an inconceivable amount of meaning, which implicates boundless active agents in the past, present and future. "New materialist theory suggests that matter matters to how life is lived" (Garber, 2019, p.7). I would argue that so does craft. My brief inquiry into the meaning carried by my crocheted objects is just scratching the surface. There is space to expand on the history of crochet across cultures, the tools (hook, tapestry needle, stitch marker) I used to craft my object, and the language and symbols of crochet patterns to name a few. There are equally many gaps to fill in the journey of my object itself, like the processing of the wool, as well as its travel to Montreal. Although my use of life-writing to recount how this wool came to me and how these samples came to be is not exhaustive. I feel this speaks to how valuable documentation can be to artists and makers. In hindsight, I only wish I could have written, photographed, and reflected more on the story of these objects, but I feel there is significance in the gaps left behind. What these gaps reveal is just how valuable object itineraries and visual life writing can be in art and craft education. Firstly, thanks to new materialist frameworks, which work to decenter humans and prove to be ripe soil for the expansion of artmaking and art appreciation practices within art education. Secondly, because of how generating object itineraries and investigating the stories of things reveals new understandings of objects, fosters empathy for non-human entities, and allows both educators and learners to think critically about who is responsible for these objects. Who owns them, cares for them, and speaks for them? This consideration can apply to objects from the natural world, objects in institutional spaces, and human-made objects alike. I believe this interrogation of my crochet samplers uncovers just how nuanced and entangled the journey of things are, proving

that nothing exists in a vacuum, everything carries limitless meaning, and no created or existing objects are better or lesser than others.

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