The Story of the Amulet: Locating the Enchantment of Collections
Jude Hill
*Journal of Material Culture* 2007; 12; 65
DOI: 10.1177/1359183507074562

The online version of this article can be found at:
http://mcu.sagepub.com/cgi/content/abstract/12/1/65

Published by:
[SAGE](http://www.sagepublications.com)

Additional services and information for *Journal of Material Culture* can be found at:

Email Alerts: http://mcu.sagepub.com/cgi/alerts

Subscriptions: http://mcu.sagepub.com/subscriptions

Reprints: http://www.sagepub.com/journalsReprints.nav

Permissions: http://www.sagepub.co.uk/journalsPermissions.nav

Citations http://mcu.sagepub.com/cgi/content/refs/12/1/65
Abstract
This article traces the stories of a group of amulets and charms from the early 20th century that were gathered together from different locations in Britain by the folklorist Edward Lovett. Through the sale of these objects, Lovett fostered a close working relationship with staff at the Wellcome Historical Medical Museum. In the museum, the amulets and charms were displayed as 'scientific' specimens as part of an attempt to trace the 'history of medicine and mankind'. However, drawing on recent work reappraising the relationships between magic, authority and modernity, and, by recognizing the magical qualities of the objects involved, it is argued that these objects retained the potential to enchant, haunting the space of the museum and disrupting the narratives of evolution and progress presented in this context. A study of the amulets' lives beyond the locus of the museum also sheds light on the potential agency of such objects and the spatialities of magical materialities in an era of modernity.

Key Words ◆ amulets ◆ collections ◆ geography ◆ magic ◆ modernity ◆ Edward Lovett ◆ Wellcome Historical Medical Museum

This article presents research into a group of British amulets, charms and mascots used during the early 20th century. These became part of the extraordinary assemblage of objects amassed by, and on behalf of, the pharmaceuticals magnate Henry Solomon Wellcome (1853–1936), a collection dedicated to understanding 'the history of medicine and mankind'. I explore how the amulets were presented as objects of folklore and as evidence of survivals in Wellcome's Historical Medical Museum. Here they were positioned within a narrative of evolution, a narrative that
implicitly celebrated the progress of (medical) science with which Wellcome’s business (Burroughs Wellcome & Co.) can also be linked. In the confines of the museum, it could be argued that the magic of these material forms became redundant, or somehow expunged. However, I suggest that it is unwise, moreover impossible, to disregard their latent power in this and other contexts.

The article draws on and responds to recent debates which highlight the tensions between magic and modernity, particularly in the context of museums, after Bouquet and Porto (2005). From these starting points, I explore the resonance and haunting effects of these amulets noting how their magic potential could be seen to challenge attempts to present the history of mankind from ‘strictly’ scientific, evolutionary perspectives in the space of this museum. Contrary to the intentions of Wellcome and his curators, I suggest that the display of objects (including amulets), in fact demonstrated that magic and modernity were closely interlinked. In another section of the article, I shift attention away from a focus on spaces and modes of display to consider the agency of the amulets during the process of acquisition, exploring the systems of exchange through which the objects became part of the collection. I also consider the embodied materialities of such magical objects within the everyday lives of their original owners, as part of complicated systems of belief beyond the locus of the museum. I therefore suggest that these objects are a focus through which to understand this and, by extension, similar collections from alternative perspectives in relation to debates concerning modernity, magic, agency and the spatialities of material culture.

INTRODUCING THE AMULETS

Numbered amongst the amulets, charms and mascots discussed in this article are several blue beaded necklaces, worn to prevent bronchitis, from different parts of London; a pair of dried mole’s feet from King’s Lynn for use as a cure against rheumatism; and a protective amulet in the shape of a small metal boot, used by a soldier of the Surrey regiment during the First World War [see Figure 1]. As these examples suggest, the material forms and uses of these amulets, charms and mascots were extremely varied. However, each was believed to hold magic powers, whether inducing luck, providing protection, or warding off evil or disease. Many objects of this sort were used by ordinary people in Britain and sometimes played an important role in their lives, shaping their attitudes towards spirituality, well-being, or even life and death, and influencing the ways in which they moved through and experienced different places.

The amulets not only served practical ends but were also of interest to scholars and writers. The widespread fascination with magic objects
of this sort is evident from the proliferation of non-fiction books [Bratley, 1907; Fernie, 1907; Villiers, 1929; Budge, 1930] and novels produced in this period (Cousin Kate, 1885; Craddock, 1906; Diver, 1909; Kensett, 1925), such as The Story of the Amulet by E.E. Nesbit (1906). Publications produced by folklorists and collectors in different areas of the country also charted the continued use of such objects as part of everyday lives, examples including John Udal’s (1922) study of Dorset, and Harland and Wilkinson’s (1867) research in Lancashire. Edward Lovett (1852–1933), an amateur folklorist from Croydon, also studied and collected material at this time. Though Lovett’s biography and life’s work have the potential to provide fascinating insight into histories of folklore and collecting in the early 20th century he remains a relatively unknown figure. This article adds to the limited published literature on Lovett, paying particular attention to some of the thousands of amulets, charms and mascots he acquired over a number of decades.

Lovett strove hard to become part of scientific and learned circles as well as making his work available to a more mainstream audience. He was a member of the council of the Folklore Society, contributing to meetings and the society’s journal on many occasions (Lovett, 1901, 1902a, 1902b, 1905, 1909a, 1909b, 1913, 1917b, 1926, 1928; Wright and Lovett, 1908). He also presented his work at other public events, including meetings held for the Royal Society, Horniman Museum and the


All photographs by the author
Croydon Natural History and Scientific Society. The folklorist also had a strong commitment to education which can partially explain why one of his life’s ambitions was to instigate the foundation of a folk museum in Britain. Whilst the project did not come to fruition, Lovett developed relationships with a variety of museums over a number of years, as a means to sell and exchange material and to publicize his work. Institutions Lovett dealt with included the Horniman Museum, Imperial War Museum, Pitt Rivers Museum, Cuming Museum and Bethnal Green Museum of Childhood, as well as the Wellcome Historical Medical Museum. The group of 400 amulets that are the focus of this article were amongst the objects Lovett sold to the latter institution over a period of 30 years.

THE WELLCOME HISTORICAL MEDICAL MUSEUM: SPACES AND MODES OF DISPLAY AND THE LOSS OF MAGIC?

Many of the amulets, charms and mascots that Lovett sold to the Wellcome Historical Medical Museum (WHMM) became part of the permanent exhibitions at 54a Wigmore Street, London, between 1914 and 1931. Access to the museum was geared towards experts or professionals, particularly to those with interests in medicine or anthropology. Notwithstanding their restricted audiences, the WHMM (as a space of display) and its associated ‘handbooks’ undoubtedly constituted the most public faces of the collection. In many respects, the exhibition of Wellcome’s collection in Wigmore Street embodied its founder’s belief in evolutionary theory (Skinner, 1986; Symons, 1993; James, 1994). The emphasis on exhibiting material culture as objects of knowledge in their own right is a case in point (Stocking, 1985; Shelton, 2000). The commitment to evolutionary principles could also be read in the location of displays, whereby visitors were obliged to pass through the Hall of Primitive Medicine before moving on to encounter other exhibits. This room therefore acted as the baseline for the exploration of medicine and ‘mankind’ in the space of the museum. The dark, cramped, cluttered layout and content of displays in the Hall of Primitive Medicine also heightened the emphasis on the ‘primitive’ and supposedly undeveloped nature of material as presented within it.

In the context of the museum this material was classified into a number of different groups including: objects and representations of ‘witch doctors’, displays of ‘fetish’ figures and also exhibits related to physical anthropology, pathology and archaeology. After 1914, European folk material, in the form of charms and talismans, was also included within the Hall of Primitive Medicine, reflecting an interest in survivals, the one important aspect of the collection that blurred the distinct
boundaries otherwise drawn between European and ‘primitive’ non-
European peoples. At this point, 37 cases of charms, talismans, amulets
and so-called divining fetishes were arranged into geographical or cultural
groupings, the 1920 museum handbook detailing this section of the
exhibits as follows:

This belief in the occult effect of certain objects exhibits the lower stages of
the human mind in seeking for the principles of natural action and is found
not only in the most barbaric tribes, but also among the highest civilized
peoples of to-day . . . The variety and number of objects employed may be
judged from the collection exhibited in this section, which ranges from the
charms and amulets used in Egypt 5000 years ago to the ‘mascots’ carried
by credulous persons at the present day. (Wellcome Historical Medical

Through the display of these objects en masse, made possible due to their
small size, and in combination with the text produced in handbooks, they
were used as evidence of survivals and the psychic unity of mankind,
through explicit application of the comparative method.

Of the cases on show, one included ‘British’ amulets, charms and
talismans, and four were filled with specimens from London, most of
which had been provided by Lovett. Furthermore, some of the Lovett
material was included in temporary exhibitions at the museum in 1914
and 1916 (see later). In these contexts, material was exhibited with limited
descriptive text. Each item was presented as an anonymous object of
evolution within a very general scheme, with little if any attempt made
to investigate past use or meanings in any depth.

As well as the erasure of individual identities it could also be argued
that the magical powers of the amulets appear to have been (temporarily)
lost or expunged in this context. As Bennett (2001: 63) suggests, ‘modern
science strips meaning from the world by reducing it to pure immanence
or materiality and matter is the antithesis of spirit and meaning’. However,
in later stages of the article I will consider the WHMM displays and
Lovett’s amulets from other perspectives, suggesting that their exhibition
in this context did not preclude their potential to enchant. Before I do
so, I want to consider the agency of the amulets and the WHMM from
a different perspective by focusing on processes of acquisition. Here, I
will explore the combined agency of Lovett and his collected objects in
building a relationship with the WHMM.

PROCESSES OF ACQUISITION: THE AMULETS AS
RELATIONAL OBJECTS

Contrary to the commonly held notion that much of the Wellcome
collection was bought or gathered almost at random, curatorial reports
and correspondence series indicate that many objects were carefully considered prior to acquisition. The job of managing the process of acquisition was left largely to the curator C.J.S. Thompson who acted as gatekeeper. However, a detailed review of archival sources indicates the extent to which the collection was co-constructed by overlapping networks of influence incorporating people, objects and places. It is therefore imperative to pay attention to the ways in which ‘outsiders’, such as Lovett [in association with his objects as active mediators], played a part in the establishment of the collection, recognizing that ‘social networks are unable to cohere without the delegated intentionality and agency of things’ (Pels et al., 2002: 8).

Lovett’s negotiations with the WHMM often followed a similar pattern; having been described by Lovett in letters to Thompson, objects were then viewed by the curator at the collector’s house or at the Wigmore Street museum. A price would be agreed, a deal struck and material then changed hands. As Lovett sold large numbers of objects to the collection, he seems to have won Thompson’s trust. Whilst Lovett’s interests were relatively wide, the types of material offered were fairly tightly defined and were selected to suit this particular collection. The material he offered was inspected and used as the basis of future decisions. In short, each interaction operated as a sort of test bed. Every package of material sent to the collection could thus be described as an opening question in a dialogue, which the curator would respond to. As Alison Brown (2001: 25) suggests, ‘collectors clearly made choices about how they related their endeavours to different audiences and often made special efforts to couch their work in terms which reflected their grasp of “modernity” and “scientific” progress’. After some time, when each had gained greater knowledge of the others’ collections and strategies, a few objects were also exchanged for mutual benefit; the flow of objects was no longer entirely one way. Objects exchanged were not simply mute and passive, but were intrinsically involved at the heart of relationships that shaped the collection. Just as Lovett’s acquisitions altered the narrative and biography of the collection, the material outcome of these interactions also affected his own profile and future relationship with the institution.

Lovett tried to bolster his status as an expert with good connections by including in batches of objects sent to the Wellcome collection, reviews of public lectures, or copies of papers he had published or presented. He also highlighted his council membership of the Folklore Society. Whilst aligning himself within ‘learned’ and scientific networks in publications, Lovett often side-stepped connections to theoretical debates (1925: 7). However, it is clear that his underlying assumptions and approach were indicative of an alliance to specific paradigms and ideas of the era; these broadly tied in with Wellcome’s own view of anthropology and the aims of his museum. For instance, whilst links
were not made explicit, Lovett made four references to customs or objects as evidence of survivals in his book *Magic in Modern London* (1925: 27, 29, 35, 100).6

More so than many other donors, Lovett gained a position of authority, agency and influence in his dealings with Thompson and therefore the wider collection. In comparison to his relationship with some other institutions, such as the Imperial War Museum, Lovett was treated with considerable respect by Wellcome staff.7 Lovett’s affiliations to learned societies may have raised his status in their eyes. Thus, he seems to have been seen as a link through which to build further beneficial connections for the good of the collection, in particular being used as a channel to reach other members of the Folklore Society.

Lovett’s influence on the collection was not confined to the provision of objects. As noted earlier, the collector’s material was also chosen for public display on a number of occasions, with Lovett himself playing an active part in their exhibition. During the run up to the opening of the Historical Medical Museum in 1913, for example, Lovett was asked to arrange the objects he had loaned for the displays. Similarly, in 1914 Lovett provided a selection of blue-beaded amulet necklaces from London, suggesting that these could be permanently displayed following his own instructions. He also drew up a map denoting where the necklaces had been acquired (Figure 2) and Thompson confirmed that the display would be attributed to Lovett himself. Two years later, Lovett approached Thompson with the idea of exhibiting a larger group of London amulets, charms and mascots.8 Having loaned 237 objects associated with the folklore of London, these were displayed in a ‘special’ exhibition in October 1916, ‘illustrating The Folk-Lore of London, consisting of medical charms, amulets and other objects used to avert disease, to ward-off evil, and to bring good fortune’.9 Lovett hand picked the objects for display, arranged the cases in the Museum and also wrote most of the notes for the pamphlet accompanying the exhibits, large sections of this material being taken from his own publications. After the 1916 exhibition, the folklorist sold most of the displays’ contents to the museum, these and other Lovett objects becoming part of the Wigmore Street exhibits until its closure.

Thompson’s collaborations with Lovett demonstrate how the curator skilfully sought out and gained a series of useful, if not highly prestigious allies to meet a variety of ends. Thus, these contributors were able to gain the curator’s trust and direct the ways in which their own and other objects were displayed. This situation stands in contrast to the influence of donors providing objects for the ethnographic museums reviewed by Coombes who suggests that: ‘Once in the hands of the curator, it was the overall schema and environment provided by the institution that constructed the object’s relation to the whole display, and subsequently
some of its meaning for the viewer' (1994: 159). Shelton (2000: 17) also suggests that 'donors’ histories, although preserved in the institutional memory [are] largely erased in their public presentation'. However, this was not always the case as we see here, such that the Wellcome Collection was susceptible to the influence of individuals and their objects. The relationships between Lovett, his material, Thompson and the WHMM thus influenced the changing fortunes of these objects, the collection as a whole and the biography of Lovett himself.

As I have already intimated, this example also demonstrates the agency of collected objects, highlighting the ways in which various objects could act as ‘social glue’, affirming a variety of relationships between people and objects, whilst moving the collection in particular directions. This approach follows the work of the late Alfred Gell (1998), in particular his active interpretation of objects and the mergence of people and things, premised on the idea that the nature of objects is a function of the social-relational matrix in which they are embedded. His work can
therefore be used in studies of collections to examine the second-class agency which artefacts acquire once enmeshed in a texture of social relationships, and that in these contexts, artefacts can be treated as agents in a variety of ways. Or, as Pels et al. (2002: 11) suggest, 'Material objects are enactments of strategies, and actively participate in the making and holding together of social relations'. As is clear from this case study, some objects may become artefactual signs of human/social agency, in this case facilitating and serving as testament to Lovett’s attempts to collaborate with the WHMM, and shape its development. Thus, collected objects play active roles within systems of negotiation and are part of the mutual constitution of biographies involving associated people, place and objects.

RETHINKING MAGIC, MODERNITY AND THE ENCHANTMENT OF AMULETS IN THE SPACE OF THE MUSEUM

In the previous section I showed how the amulets were not simply specimens of folklore or evolution in the context of the Wellcome Historical Medical Museum, by exploring their role as relational objects within processes of acquisition. Returning to spaces of display, I further explore their agency from other perspectives. Here, I demonstrate how the museum and associated curatorial strategies (whether influenced by Lovett, Thompson or Wellcome), could not expunge the magic of the exhibited amulets and in some respects highlighted their potential for enchantment.

Meyer and Pels (2003: 3) provide a useful framework through which to consider this apparent paradox; here the authors argue that magic haunts modernity— that it can work ‘as a counterpoint to liberal understandings of modernity’s transparency and rational progress’. As Pels (2003: 29) argues, it makes little sense to talk of a singular modernity or of a unilinear process of modernization. Haunted by their own diagnoses of the process of modern development, even the classical theorists of ‘modernity’ acknowledge how much it was riven by contradiction, regression and paradox. A singular modernity was never an empirical, historical fact except as a Eurocentric ideology of a universal teleology of the evolution of social systems, such as provided by modernization theory.

Furthermore, parallels can be drawn between the magic and enchantment of advertising campaigns used to promote pharmaceutical products (as manufactured by businesses such as Wellcome’s Burroughs Wellcome & Co.) and the belief in the magic of objects such as amulets and charms which became part of Wellcome’s collection. As John Pickstone reminds us, it is important to
go beyond the simple contrasts and oppositions that dog our discussions of medicine, science and arts. Oppositions such as scientific versus non-scientific, or rational versus magical, are not very helpful – especially if we restrict the title 'science' to the 'natural sciences' and assume it is all done in laboratories, and in much the same way; or if we simply contrast the scientific method claimed by some modern medicine with the variety of practices attached to medicine in other cultures. (Pickstone, 2003: 271)

As Pickstone also suggests, science is compounded of several projects or ways of knowing and it is crucial to consider the technologies of morale (akin with propaganda, advertising etc.) and 'roles of "magic" in our own lives'. (2003: 278)

Within Science, Magic and Religion, a collection of essays edited by Bouquet and Porto (2005), various ideas relevant to this discussion are explored in the context of museums and collections. As Macdonald explains, '[Museums] involve a particular kind of mediation, and interplay between authoritative knowledge [science] and enchantment [magic] – an interplay which to some extent varies across time and space, and across different kinds of museums and their relatives’ (2005: 210). Thus, recent curatorial strategies have led to a 'relative shifting of the balance from science towards magic' (2005: 216), whereas the WHMM could be likened to Macdonald’s description of the 19th century [public] museum as 'the established church' of museums. Within the latter, authority [science] dominated and attempted to eliminate enchantment [magic]. However, 'science museums have long been associated with a sense of wonder and magic' (Harvey, 2005: 29), in some cases despite the intentions of curators.

Moreover, Pels (2003) suggests that anthropologists, in particular Tylor, who influenced Wellcome’s own view of ‘history’ and ‘mankind’ (see Tylor, 1871), were unsuccessful in their attempts to purify modernity of unwanted survivals. Similarly, in the WHMM, attempts to exhibit survivals and ‘dying’ systems of belief in relation to a narrative of evolution inadvertently demonstrated that magic remained important, or that it actually belonged to modernity. The simple map depicting bronchitis necklaces found by Lovett in London makes this point very clearly, indicating that magical practices were alive and well in the capital, co-existing in the same city as Wellcome’s Museum where amulets, charms and mascots were displayed as scientific specimens (see Figure 2).

In the context of modern-day science museums, Harvey suggests that Objects held in museums do not have the intrinsic capacity to enchant. Visitors need to be drawn into relationships with them and the skill of those who put the exhibition together is to find a way to articulate that relationship that both attracts and educates. (2005: 31)

However, in a consideration of the WHMM several decades earlier, I would argue that the very materiality of the museum’s exhibits and the
modes of display used provide a further means through which to reconsider the agency and magical status of the objects in the context of this and similar collections. These objects once had the potential for intense significance, when carried, held or worn close to the skin, or when placed in strategic positions in the home or workplace. The museum’s glass display cabinets that framed and encased the amulets could be seen as the means through which their power as active objects was removed within the narration of a broader scientific message of progress in which magic played no part. An alternative interpretation of the exhibits would be to consider the glass cases as a form of lens, magnifying the potential power of the amulets inside. By re-reading the depersonalized material as displayed en masse in these contexts, the blurring multitude of manifold stories become all the more apparent, thus countering curatorial intentions to remove any sense of enchantment. Thus, collections of amulets and charms, objects which could be presented as the museum’s radical ‘other’, are particularly well placed to critique certain aspects of traditional museum culture and its rituals of collecting and exhibition at a fundamental level.

Here one could also draw on the work of Hetherington (2001: 40) who suggests that ‘we should pay attention to the object and its phantasmagoria . . . It is not just humans that have a memory and oral history, things too can tell us something about their past and our possible future that we cannot find in our own representations of that past’. Just as magic may well haunt modernity, the richness of these collected objects’ lives haunted (and continues to haunt) the collection of which they became a part. Tim Edensor (2001: 49) suggests that museums tend to fix views of the past, quoting de Certeau and Giard’s (1998: 134) claim that ‘the ghost [of artefacts] is exorcised under the name of “national heritage”. Its strangeness is converted into legitimacy’. Ruins, on the other hand, Edensor argues, are sites that offer the means through which to ‘construct alternative stories, to decentralise commodified, official and sociological descriptions and conjures spooky allegories that keep the past open-ended’ (2001: 49). However, whilst notably different from ruins, I would argue that the very constricted ways in which the material was presented in the space of the WHMM did not foreclose alternative interpretations. Indeed, these exhibits may have focused viewers’ attention on the active uses and embodied materialities of the amulets beyond the space of the collection, perhaps even prompting onlookers to reflect on the resonance of such objects within their own lives. Furthermore, as Bouquet and Porto (2005: 4) suggest, we must be mindful of the ‘ways in which museum publics actively use the museum for their own performances; and to consider how their performances dovetail [or fail to] with curatorial agency in the kinds of encounters that take place between different parties on the ritual site’.

In my own work, when reading about and viewing pictures of the original displays, and when researching the objects in storage, I have also
been drawn to consider individual material forms and think about their roles in everyday lives and places beyond the confines of Wellcome’s museum. When encountering some of these amulets and charms in 2003 in the vaults of the Science Museum in west London I found each item encased in a plastic pocket and stored in trays for purposes of conservation (Figure 3). Despite or perhaps due to the clinical context of presentation, I was drawn to investigate their connections to particular people’s lives, though these individuals are now anonymous, impossible to trace. To paraphrase Bennett [2001: 64], the ‘liveliness, resilience, unpredictability or recalcitrance [of the objects I was researching, became] a source of wonder’ [2001: 64].

Of course it is important to recognize that the ways in which the amulets are presented to us now are necessarily shaped by their past treatment and histories when they were part of a specific type of collection. Some would argue that attempts to dig deeper into the stories of these amulets beyond the context of the original WHMM collection could be curtailed or even prevented entirely, as the documentation of individual

FIGURE 3 Tray of amulets, charms and mascots acquired by Edward Lovett and sold to the Wellcome Historical Medical Museum. Now part of the Wellcome Collections in the care of the Science Museum, London, Blythe House stores.

Photograph by the author
amulets, charms and mascots is so limited. It is well known that poorly
documented objects were commonplace within collections made in the
late 19th and early 20th centuries when 'it was [often] held that the
meanings of things could be experienced without knowledge [or repro-
duction] of detailed contexts' (Ucko, 2001: 294). Many objects from the
Wellcome collection are also deemed to be of questionable use as museum
pieces due to the ways in which they were originally acquired. While this
is understandable in view of protocols of contemporary museum practice,
it carries a risk. As Peter Ucko argues, using Freud's collection as his
focus, examining poorly documented collections and present-day atti-
ditudes towards them can represent useful case studies of changing values
which may be ascribed to collected objects (Ucko, 2001: 293).

A lack of documented evidence is not necessarily an obstruction or
frustration. Indeed, it could be argued that the absence of documentation,
and thus the presence of gaps in biographies, raise important research
questions in their own right. Such gaps may offer new opportunities for
interpretations from heterodox perspectives as explored in the two
concluding sections. Whatever the situation, whether unprovenanced or
contextualized in a collection, objects do not passively yield up their
'original meanings':

To transpose an object from the past into a narrated present is to bring it
into a renewed present, a new reality . . . [It springs from an original object
['memory-trace'] but] it may no longer resemble nor contain [it] except as
part of a narrative fiction, albeit a narrative with a very profound 'present'

Like Edensor's ruins, in some senses the limited documentation
associated with the amulets opens up alternative possibilities for interpret-
ation. One can begin to recognize, if not necessarily pinpoint, the specifics
of objects' layered histories, making links to manifold lives they became
a part of and places where they were once used. From this perspective,
it is once more apparent that the collection is not just about Wellcome
(the founder), Thompson (the curator) or donors such as Lovett. It is also
bound up with the lived lives of many anonymous folk, the places they
inhabited and the embodied materialities of the objects they became
associated with. It is to these I now turn, before going on to consider
how these and other amulets provide opportunities to understand how
people live their lives now.10

THE MAGIC OF AMULETS IN EVERYDAY LIVES
AND THE CITY

Like much of the material in the Wellcome collection, most of these
amulets had been relatively mundane objects as used by ordinary people.
None were conventionally beautiful or made out of expensive materials.
The Lovett examples have a unique sort of beauty, fragility and symbolism; they generally appear fairly home-made or makeshift, and most had been fashioned out of natural, in some cases, fairly commonplace materials. However meagre, crude or apparently unsophisticated, their power as magic, protective objects was intrinsically linked to their material construction, often in combination with their particular form or shape. The shape of a mole’s foot was thus deemed to be related directly to its power as an amulet (see Figure 1). In Lovett’s words:

There is a quaint form of superstition which has been described as sympathetic magic . . . It is the front feet, or digging feet as they are called, which are selected, and it will be seen how strongly they are curved for this purpose! Indeed it is astonishing how quickly a mole will put himself out of sight if alarmed in the open. Now this permanent curve is regarded by the folk as due to cramp and therefore as ‘like cures like’ it must be a cure for cramp if carried in the pocket [or in a bag around the neck]. (Lovett, 1928: 15)

Similarly, the power of the horseshoe was partly connected to its manufacture out of iron, and symbolic shape [Lovett, 1928: 20–1]. Several of the First World War ‘mascots’ collected by Lovett consisted of particular forms relating to certain superstitions. Examples include a boot, regarded all over the world as ‘lucky’ because it symbolizes a foot walking a path and ‘therefore the path of life’ (see Figure 1). Other Lovett war charms included brooches formed in the shape of black cats, clovers and so on. It is therefore imperative to appreciate the specific meaning of an individual object’s material construction.

Many other Wellcome objects have the potential to lead one on to very personal and sometimes intimate stories. They are loaded with memory, whether of places, experiences or social relations. Ex-voto pictures, for example, tell the stories of everyday people’s gratitude following their return to good health. These objects and countless others in the collection are also imbued with intensely personal narratives. However, the sense of intimacy and intense personal attachment associated with these amulets seem heightened as these objects often operated as part of the body; almost as if a permanent fixture, held close to or against the skin. Some objects were placed in strategic positions within the house, such as horseshoes, or the ‘quantity of snail shells once strung up behind a door of a small house in east London to ward off evil’.

According to one dictionary, an amulet may be described as:

A charm that is worn as a necklace, bracelet or other decoration about the person in order to benefit from its magical properties. The word itself comes from the Arabic ‘hamala’, meaning ‘to carry’; hamala is also the name of the neck cord from which the faithful suspend their Koran. (Pickering, 1999: 9)
Some amulets, charms or mascots, particularly those used for medicinal purposes, had to be concealed and worn against the body to have any sort of effect. This was the case for the blue bead necklaces worn as a protection against bronchitis which Lovett collected in London (Lovett, 1925: 81–4. See Figure 1). Dried potatoes had to be carried in the pocket at all times in order to work as a cure for rheumatism. First World War soldiers often pinned charms onto their clothes to ensure constant protection during military action; some sewed old farthings as mascots onto braces, offering protection through close proximity to the heart (Lovett, 1925: 70–1). It is also important to consider these objects in association with action and performance. The connections between objects and everyday public and private rituals were crucial as a means to release their power. Certain objects were stroked against diseased parts of the body as a cure. As Gavin MacGregor (1999) suggests, the recognition of sensory perception of artefacts is an often neglected means through which to ascertain deeper interpretations of their stories and uses.

In recent research in Japan, Daniels (2003) examines how commodities known as ‘Engimono’ become invested with an informal domestic form of spirituality translated as luck. These objects are part of extended networks of human and non-human agents and embodied everyday practices. Daniels notes how as secondary agents ‘Engimono’ ‘make things happen in the world’ (2003: 623) and that the power of objects can be ‘situated in their mundane application’ (2003: 626). Some similarities can be drawn between these ‘Engimono’ and the role of amulets, charms and mascots in the lives of Londoners and soldiers several decades earlier. Oral histories conducted by Williams (1999) with residents of Southwark give further insight into the role that such objects played in the lives of many Londoners. It is clear from her work that the use of amulets, mascots and charms fitted alongside ties to more formal religion and influenced the ways in which lives were lived. To quote Williams here:

magical remedies, rituals and explanations which were passed down by word of mouth from one generation to the next may be seen as alternative narrative or folk religious discourse. This included a variety of beliefs and in some cases a more overt concept of the supernatural. Thus discourse was far more eclectic and thematic than that of church-based religion. It was not systematic and the absence of any formal institution base meant that it was subject to a greater degree of personal and local interpretation. None the less it remained a way of seeing and interpreting the world and of acting towards it in response. (Williams, 1999: 12)

Whilst ‘various folk responses to the super-empirical sphere’ coexisted and ‘were enacted alongside’ church-based rituals (Williams, 1999: 12), ‘the supernatural was . . . evoked or placated in so far as it was believed to have an immediate bearing on everyday life’ (1999: 165).
Pels et al. (2002: 13) have noted how ‘People perform objects . . . but these objects also perform people by constraining their movements and by suggesting particular encounters between them and others’. Similarly, in various ways, amulets, mascots and charms influenced the ways in which people behaved in certain situations, directly affecting how they experienced and navigated the world. As Doel and Segrott (2003: 747) have shown in the context of contemporary practices of Complimentary and Alternative Medicine, ‘CAM transforms space as much as it transforms bodies’. Many of the amulets, charms and mascots which latterly became part of Lovett’s and Wellcome’s collections had also been part of very private geographies of the body or the home, in practices of everyday life or in some cases landscapes of war.

The transformative powers of such objects also provide the means through which to demonstrate the influence of magic within other spaces too. In particular, research using these amulets could be extended to complement the recent work of scholars reconsidering the nature of cities through an exploration of magic. In the opening decades of the 20th century, superstitious beliefs and magic were generally associated with the countryside rather than the city. As Pile (2005) notes, this was a view promoted by theorists such as Robert Park (1967a [1925], 1967b [1925]) who argued that magic is mutually exclusive from modernity, and emphasized the scientific rationalities of modern cities. It is an interesting coincidence that Lovett’s book *Magic in Modern London*, was also published in 1925, this being one of several publications produced by the author with a focus on the continued presence of magical practices in the capital. These included articles for local and national newspapers (1910, 1917a, 1922, 1926, 1927) and more learned journals such as *Folklore* (1909a, 1913, 1917b; Wright and Lovett, 1908). In one of these articles Lovett noted:

> It is a common idea that few traces of folk-beliefs can be found in great cities, but my own experience is that, at any rate for the seeker after amulets, there is no better hunting ground than the hawkers’ handbarrows in the poorest parts or slums of such dense aggregations of people as London. (1909b: 70)

Lovett and his objects could thus be considered within debates considering cities specifically in relation to modernity and magic. In particular, useful links could be made to the work of Steve Pile who has ‘sought to open up a field of analysis that is capable of taking seriously the imaginative, fantastic, emotional – the phantasmagoric – aspects of city life . . . to foreground spatialities that are normally occluded in understandings of city life’ (2005: 3). Using London, New York, New Orleans and Singapore as his case studies he goes on to suggest that ‘by tracking magical beliefs and practices, we can see that magic has been important not only in the phantasmagorias of city life but also in how people have
sought to influence and control cities, magically and otherwise’ (2005: 63). These ways of looking at magic in modern cities thus challenge certain views of progress, order, modernity and rationality just as research into amulets of the sort discussed in this article may challenge the past presentation of magic objects within and beyond the spaces of the Wellcome collection.

CONCLUSIONS

In this article I have traced the stories of a group of amulets, charms and mascots, as used in Britain, acquired by the folklorist Edward Lovett and sold to the Wellcome Historical Medical Museum. Through this focus I have suggested possible ways to reconsider the agency and magic of collected objects within and beyond spaces of collection, and have also provided alternatives to existing interpretations of the Wellcome Collection.

As we have seen, Lovett and Wellcome shared an interest in survivals in the context of narratives of evolution and progress. This common ground partly explains how the folklorist was able to make and sustain links with Wellcome, his curatorial staff and the museum. As I have demonstrated, Wellcome did not solely determine the collection’s development; the collection was also shaped by the influence of ‘outsiders’ such as Lovett in association with the material they contributed. Indeed, the latter operated as relational objects during the process of acquisition; forging, sustaining and bearing testament to the partnership between Lovett, the institution and its employees. Thus, the collection was and remains the product of many different relationships involving manifold people, objects and places.

Furthermore, the collection should not be interpreted from the perspective of evolutionary narratives alone. Attempts to make sense of the world in the 19th and 20th centuries through links to evolution were often riven with contradiction and ambiguity; despite efforts to separate them, magic belongs to or haunts modernity (Meyer and Pels, 2003). Similarly the magic potential of ‘Lovett’s’ amulets, charms and mascots haunted the ‘strictly scientific’ exhibits of the WHMM. This research therefore contributes to recent attempts to reappraise the links between authority and enchantment in the space of museums (Bouquet and Porto, 2005).

By recognizing the enchanting potential of amulets outside the walls of the museum, further possibilities for alternative interpretations of the collection’s development also become apparent. For instance, a focus on the embodied materialities of magic objects in everyday lives and spaces of the city or landscapes of war provide insight into the collection’s varied histories and geographies. Lovett’s own biography, to which I
return shortly, provides a potential starting point to inform research of this sort.

Just as the ways of knowing and understanding presented within the WHMM were far from clear-cut, Lovett’s own views of the magic objects he acquired were more complicated than they appear to be on initial inspection. Lovett was an active member of the Folklore Society, and it is also apparent that he mixed with figures such as George Laurence Gomme [1853–1916], the author of several publications including The Handbook of Folklore (1890) and FolkLore as an Historical Science (1908). We have also seen how the folklorist sold material to institutions such as the WHMM, the Horniman Museum and Pitt Rivers, each attempting to exhibit their material following the logic of ‘scientific’ principles. In publications Lovett often dismissed the notion that amulets and charms could work as effective magical objects, referring to them, somewhat sneeringly, in relation to outmoded superstitious beliefs. He also made reference to the ‘scientific’ work of scholars such as Frazer and Haddon who had begun to demonstrate the link between magic objects and the ‘primitive’ mind (Lovett, 1925: 75, 78). However, Lovett also seems to have participated in particular rituals of magical belief involving the use, exchange and even production of objects. For instance, Lovett named and designed his own ‘Motor Mascot’ produced by Gamage for commercial sale (see Figure 4a and b). Though he may well have been motivated by a desire to cash in on a popular trend of the day, this indicates the ambiguity of Lovett’s own beliefs, demonstrating that he actively engaged in practices that he described in far from favourable terms in ‘learned’ articles (Lovett, 1902a; Wright and Lovett, 1908) and books (1925: 94).

Indeed, some of his texts also appear to illuminate the efficacy of particular magical objects. In Magic in Modern London, Lovett related how he gave a mascot for good luck to a ‘colonial’ soldier (1925: 19), though this was a practice he also described from an ‘objective’ point of view in the same publication. Similarly, but perhaps more poignantly, Lovett made a charm for his youngest son to wear as protection against the perils of the front during the First World War (Sage, n.d.).

Further investigations of Lovett’s work and biography, the foci of enquiry in a new project being undertaken by the author, will provide greater insight into the objects’ past uses. These forms of research, beyond the museum, are especially important due to the limits of traditional museological interpretation when exploring intimate geographies and meanings associated with certain collected objects, such as how and why amulets and charms were worn on the body or incorporated into the home. These performances and linkages to many different places are part of the collections’ manifold histories and geographies and can add to, or in some cases, challenge other interpretations suggested to date.
The amulets and charms collected by Lovett could also be incorporated into programmes of future research to elicit how similar objects influence the biographies of people and places today. Such research could lead to deeper understandings of place, identity and well-being in a variety of contexts, such as landscapes of war, or, following Pile (2005), to investigate the potent influence of magic in contemporary cities. For instance, London, it can be assumed, contains many artefacts that point to the globalized nature of material cultures enabling people to establish a sense of home and security. Moreover, perhaps there is also a moral–ethical agenda at stake here. Thus, strategies for understanding attachments to ‘magic’ objects in everyday life, both historically and in the present day could prove essential as part of the humanization of museum culture, being intrinsically bound up in discourses of inclusion and in the restitution of human dignity and human justice inside and outside the museum.

**Figure 4A** Advertisement for the ‘Lovett Motor Mascot’, produced c. 1912.

**Figure 4B** An example of the ‘Lovett Motor Mascot’. Cuming Museum, London Borough of Southwark [16/1/113a].

*Photograph by the author*
Acknowledgments

I would like to thank the editors and anonymous reviewers for their useful comments and suggestions on earlier drafts of this article. I am also very grateful to members of staff at the Science Museum, Cuming Museum, Pitt Rivers and Wellcome Trust Library for their help with this research. My PhD was funded by the ESRC (award R4220013427).

Notes


2. A document outlining Lovett’s proposals for a folk museum (featuring the folklorist’s own collections), was enclosed with a letter addressed to the curator of the Wellcome Historical Medical Museum, with whom he had recently become acquainted [dated 4 November 1911]. In this he noted that ‘the main object of my life is to place my collections where they should be of real educational value as a folk museum’. Alfred Haddon supported Lovett’s proposals for a folk museum, the anthropologist’s written endorsement being printed in the promotional leaflet.


4. Parallels could be drawn here with the Liverpool Museum’s galleries of 1901 [Coombes, 1994: 140–1], wherein displays were separated into the ‘three great ethnic divisions of the globe’.

5. See WA/HMM/CO/Ear/532/E. Lovett, 1904–13, 25 August 1913 and WA/HMM/RP/THO/10, 10 January 1917. (The prefix WA/HMM refers to the Wellcome Historical Medical Museum Archives, part of the Wellcome Archives housed at the Wellcome Library.)

6. Perhaps Lovett did not emphasize the implicit connections he made to broader theoretical trends of the day [e.g. concerning survivals] as these had become almost taken for granted amongst most fellow folklorists of this period [Dorson, 1968].

7. See WA/HMM/CO/Ear/532/E. Lovett, 1914–17, 3 September 1914.


9. This was one of relatively few temporary exhibitions to be held at the WHMM.

10. Parallels can be drawn with *The Phantom Museum* (Hawkins and Olsen, 2003) an edited collection produced in association with *Medicine Man*, an exhibition curated by the Wellcome Trust held at the British Museum from June to November 2003. In *The Phantom Museum* contributors used ‘sympathetic imagination’ to explore and present different aspects of the Wellcome Collection. The volume was offered by its editors as a ‘memorial to the millions of [sometimes imaginary] lives that the objects in Wellcome’s Collection have touched’ [Hawkins and Olsen, 2003: xiv].

11. Description of object A665418 from the collection of Lovett objects held by the Science Museum.

12. Other sorts of amuletic devices, in particular talismans fashioned from (used) bullets, were made by soldiers in the war [Saunders, 2003].
The new project referred to here is funded by the Royal Geographical Society’s small grant scheme. Research involves work with objects and associated archives at sites including the Cuming Museum, the Imperial War Museum and the Science Museum.

References
Acknowledgments


Fernie, William (1907) Precious Stones: For Curative Wear and Other Remedial Uses; Likewise the Nobler Uses. Bristol: J. Wright and Co.


Gomme, George Laurence (1890) The Handbook of Folklore. London.

Gomme, George Laurence (1908) Folklore as an Historical Science. London: Methuen.


Sage, J. (undated) Lovett. Typescript held at the Horniman Museum Library.


Udal, John (1922) Dorsetshire Folklore. Hertford: S. Austin & Sons.


◆ JUDE HILL is a lecturer in human geography and member of the Historical and Cultural Geography Research group at the University of Exeter. She completed her doctoral thesis at Royal Holloway University of London in 2004. This examined the ongoing histories and geographies of the Wellcome Collection. Publications from the thesis contribute to the study of material geographies, collecting, colonialism, museology, anthropology, and the history of medicine and science. Jude has recently embarked on a new project to extend her research into the use, study and collection of British amulets and charms since the late 19th century – this is funded by a small grant awarded by the Royal Geographical Society. Address: Department of Geography, University of Exeter, Amory Building, Rennes Drive, Exeter, EX4 4RJ, UK. [email: Jude.Hill@exeter.ac.uk]