Closing the Book, Leaving the Locker Open

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In creating and studying the South Station Hoard, we set out to examine perceptions and memories of the frequently violent act of treasure taking. Comparing tween girls and their nuanced tactics of surveillance and bullying to those same skills of medieval warriors allowed us to create an intimate circular relationship between precious objects and both their owners and their takers. This relationship is important but so were our own processes of research, object interrogation, visualization and writing.

Ultimately, while studying the past and speculating about the future, we found our own voices.


In the Fall of 2009, I was teaching my survey of medieval art when news of the Staffordshire Hoard discovery broke. I was so excited I canceled my planned lecture of the day and my class spent an hour listening to new reports and looking at the Flickr set. I kept saying, “This changes EVERYTHING!” The students were most interested in the sheer volume and value of gold, the luck and sincerity of Terry Herbert, and the audacity of the British Museum. Everything was positive and monumental — in hindsight, it was almost as if I wasn’t really looking at the objects. Since that Fall, I’ve talked about the Hoard in other survey classes and traveled to Washington DC to see a selection of objects at the Scholarly. Creative. Brave.
National Geographic Museum in November 2011. The luster of the objects has faded and my excitement about the objects has increasingly turned to anxiety.

In my mind, I created a Robin Hood scenario of warriors taking objects with good intentions, hiding them away and then falling victim to some terrible fate. The more time I spent in front of the objects I started to get the sense that my gallant warriors were probably thieves. In the weeks before I saw the objects, the news has been full of accounts of teens tormenting each other to the point of suicide. I began to see those responsible for the Staffordshire Hoard as bullies and the hoard as loot taken from their victims. My daughter was about 5 months old at the time and I was so worried about what the world would be for her as a young teen.

Our Hoard helped us understand the violence of taking but also the importance of making, holding, and hiding precious objects. This project took each of us outside of our comfortable disciplinary boxes and we are better for it. This project has been a true collaboration. Outside of the core group listed on our Table of Contents we owe debts of gratitude to the following kindred souls: Amber Edwards, Ella Grace Antle, Julia Pemberton, Emily Bastin, Austin Acord, Matt Accord, David Rhea, Samarth Swarup, and the Material Collective.

This project has been one so intimately tied with discovery
and we hope it will raise questions on many levels. We also hope that our Hoard will inspire new conversations about our relationship with the objects we treasure as well as the role of power in such relationships. The lesson plan that follows offers many practical exercises for exploring such themes.

Our personal histories shaped the South Station Hoard and being part of this creative collaboration has emboldened us all.