

The Things We Leave Behind

Draft program notes

In 2014, I became an accidental archaeologist after my husband and I bought a property in Philadelphia and discovered two 18th-century privy pits beneath our building filled with artifacts from before and during the Revolutionary War. As I dug, cleaned, and catalogued these household objects—with the help of some real archaeologists at the National Park Service, the Museum of the American Revolution, and Colonial Williamsburg—I became obsessed with the stories embedded in them, starring the ordinary people who left them behind. While most of us think of archaeology as the study of people from the very distant past—those who created Ancient Egyptian pyramids or Peruvian temples or Paleolithic cave paintings in France—I was struck by the way these more recent finds connected me to archaeology’s constant and continuing process. Everything we abandon, from the trash on our streets to the trinkets in our attics to the chemicals in our soil, is a record of who we are, and future generations (assuming humanity survives) will divine our everyday stories by studying our detritus.

Aside: for a stunning example of an archaeology exhibition that makes this clear, check out [Below the Surface](#): artifacts uncovered during a recent expansion of Rokin metro station in Amsterdam are displayed between the commuter escalators and available online for viewing. What I love most about this exhibition is that the finds are grouped into categories and cover all time periods of human habitation in the area, so for example, clay pipes from the 15th century appear right next to gaudy plastic hash pipes from the 20th century (it is Amsterdam, after all).

Second aside: for an amusing take on how we can get stories from the past very wrong, check out [David Macaulay’s *Motel of the Mysteries*](#), a favorite book of many archaeologists, which imagines 41st-century archaeologists making wild assumptions based on objects they find in a buried 20th-century motel.

In modern North America, we are so wedded to living in the “now” that we tend to disregard our long-term storyline. Our exploitation of natural resources and marginalized populations for short-term gains has had obvious detrimental effects on the environment and our society. One of the ways that archaeology can shift our thinking is by encouraging us to see our place in a broader timeline and guiding us as we prepare the world for future generations.

The Things We Leave Behind contrasts stories of the past with stories we are currently creating through abandoned objects, from the stone-age Willendorf Venus to mass-produced novelty mugs and microscopic man-made particles deposited in the ground. One song’s text is taken from the wills of the first Europeans who owned my property in the 18th century, and another is a tribute to an enslaved 19th-century potter whose work I learned about as I dove into the world of Early American ceramics. Throughout, the past stories are connected to the familiar present, in the hope that we will consider our own impact in the ongoing material record of humanity. Woven into the score are a few musical artifacts: the Gregorian chant *Per omnia saecula saeculorum*, and a sneaky *Ave maria* and *Dies irae*.