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Artifact Study: The Baseball

As author Victor Alexander Baltov, Jr. once said, “baseball is an American icon. It is the Statue of Liberty, the bald eagle, ‘In God We Trust,’ Mount Rushmore, ice cream, apple pie, hot dogs, and rally monkeys. Baseball is America,” (“Baseball Quotes”). Many people around the United States attend professional baseball games or know a child who plays Little League baseball, but not many people take the time to think about the baseball itself. One way to learn about the baseball is through an artifact study. E. McClung Fleming created a four-step process to complete an artifact study: identification, evaluation, cultural analysis, and interpretation (Fleming 162). The artifact study that follows first identifies the object and its process of authentication, then evaluates the object in both subjective and objective manners, relates the object to culture through collecting and auctioning, and finally relates the object to current values.

While the patented baseball that is known and loved today will be discussed later, one must first recognize early ball constructions. Before professional baseball, balls were assembled by cobblers who used pieces of rubber from old shoes; the balls had rubber cores that were wrapped in yarn with a leather cover (Stamp). In the 1840s and 50s, pitchers made their own balls, which led to a variety in size and weight. Though there was much variation, some designs were more prominent than others. One prominent design was called the “lemon peel” because

the core of the ball was wrapped in one piece of leather with four lines of stitching (see Figure 1). “Lemon peel” balls were smaller than current baseballs as they were only around six inches in circumference as opposed to nine inches and they weighed less (Stamp).

Balls became more standardized in the mid 1850s when New York area teams decided that a baseball’s weight should be between five and a half to six ounces and its circumference between eight and eleven inches. Throughout the next decade, the ball evolved and many teams created balls that would best suit their strengths so that they would win games (Stamp). While there is debate over who invented the two-part cover that is seen today, that design became prominent because of Hardwood & Sons, who built the first baseball production factory in Massachusetts and mass produced baseballs. In 1876, newly retired Boston Red Sox pitcher A.G. Spalding convinced the National League to make his ball the standard, and Spalding’s company produced National League baseballs for the next 100 years (Stamp).

The cork-core ball was patented on August 31, 1909 by Benjamin Shibe. According to Shibe, “the center is formed of a resilient sphere, upon which the ball is constructed to the desired diameter of yarn or other thread tightly wound thereon and secured by a binder of adhesive plastic composition upon its surface adjacent to the outer cover of horse hide or similar material,” (“BASE-BALL”). Shibe believed that a cork core would regulate the resiliency of the ball better than the rubber core did. The patent also stated that the ball undergoes a hardening treatment where it is heated to about 264 degrees Fahrenheit for about 45 minutes so that the ball would become compact and stiff (“BASE-BALL”).

In 1925, a “cushion cork” ball was invented by Milton B. Reach. This ball contained a sphere of cork that was surrounded by semi-vulcanized rubber and then surrounded by another

layer of red rubber. The American League and National League agreed to make that ball the standard. *The New York Times* then released an article about the ball which also detailed the winding process. The winding process is done on a revolving machine; according to the article, “yarn windings consist first of 121 yards of rough gray wool, forty-five yards of white wool then 53 yards of fine gray wool and finally 150 yards of fine white cotton,” (Stamp). After winding, the ball is coated with rubber cement and covered in two pieces of horsehide in a figure eight, hand-stitched with red thread; each ball has 108 stitches (Stamp). Since then, the baseball has mostly remained the same (see Figure 2).

The Official Baseball Rules, created by Major League Baseball (MLB), summarizes the construction of a baseball in saying it is a “sphere formed by yarn wound around a small core of cork, rubber or similar material, covered with two strips of horsehide or cowhide, tightly stitched together,” (“Official MLB Rules”). The rules also detail that the ball must be between five and 5 ¼ ounces and between nine and 9 ¼ inches in circumference (“Official MLB Rules”). Rawlings, a sporting goods company, has been the exclusive supplier of baseballs to MLB for over 40 years (“MLB Official Baseballs”). Other baseball suppliers include Mizuno, Pro Nine Sports, and Wilson Sporting Goods Company (Little League). The average price for a bag of 12 Rawlings baseballs on Amazon costs \$20.

In a day and age when ball collecting and cheating scandals are so prevalent, all baseballs used in Major League Baseball and Little League are authenticated. In addition, balls that have been collected and signed are authenticated by insurers who write policies that cover sports memorabilia and verify the legitimacy of the item (Belson). Baseballs that are used for MLB include a stamp that states “Official Major League Baseball” and are signed by the current MLB

commissioner (“MLB Official Baseballs”; see Figure 2). Though not all Little League baseballs are produced by Rawlings, they do have a stamp that says “Little League” to ensure they are acceptable (see Figure 3).

Subjectively, baseballs are produced perfectly for their intended purpose. The cork center allows the ball to ricochet when it is hit, which makes for an exciting game of baseball. A standardized ball like the one used today ensures less cheating or creation of balls that will work in one team’s favor. The horsehide or cowhide along with the stitches allow the pitcher to easily grip the ball. Since there have not been many changes to the design since 1925, it must be effective for the game. The white and red design is simple, aesthetic, and recognizable to many.

In order to evaluate the baseball objectively, one must consider similar objects. In this case, the baseball will be compared to balls used in two similar ball-and-bat sports: wiffle ball and cricket. A wiffle ball is made of translucent plastic material such as polyethylene and then molded into its spherical shape. Wiffle balls contain apertures (holes) that can either be cut out of the finished ball or added in the molding process (“US4930776A - Game Ball.”). Wiffle balls are around the same size as a baseball in that they are 2 ¼ inches in diameter, resulting in a circumference of about seven inches (see Figure 4). Unlike baseballs, wiffle balls have wind-resisting characteristics (the apertures) that make the ball disproportionate and therefore the ball follows a curved path (“US4930776A - Game Ball.”). It is relatively easy to find wiffle balls in the United States because they are mass produced like baseballs. On Amazon, one can find a pack of nine wiffle balls for about ten dollars.

Cricket is a sport that is not typically played in the United States. Balls that are used in cricket are hard and similar to baseballs, as they are made of cork and string covered with

leather. Cricket balls are like baseballs in size and hardness, but the leather is thicker and is joined in two hemispheres unlike the figure eight stitching on a baseball (“An Explanation of Cricket”). The seam of a cricket ball is like an equator with raised stitching, and its circumference is between 8.81-9 inches (see Figure 5). Opposite a baseball, a cricket ball is red with white stitching (“An Explanation of Cricket”). Cricket balls are more difficult to find in the United States than baseballs and wiffle balls, and on Amazon one cricket ball costs about \$20.

After background information on how baseballs are made and with which products, and an evaluation of the design and workmanship, one may wonder what the object means to its culture. Through this, a researcher can look at both intended and unintended functions. A baseball’s intended function is to be used in the sport of the same name, whether that is Little League, a pickup game, or Major League Baseball. According to Encyclopedia Britannica, baseball is “a game played with a bat, a ball, and gloves between two teams of nine players each on a field with four white bases laid out in a diamond,” (Rader et al.). Without the ball, the sport would not exist. Many people consider baseball to be America’s pastime. It unified people through the Great Depression in the 1930s and it reshaped the calendar in that the beginning of the baseball season meant the beginning of spring, and the World Series meant it was fall (Rader et al.).

Baseballs have found their way into many other aspects of life including collecting and auctioning. Corey Shanus, an avid baseball collector, explained his hobby by saying, “It’s not what you collect, but the pleasure you get out of it... I loved baseball and I love collecting and it does something to me,” (Belson). His mother collected American art, coins, glass, and antique silver, so collecting ran in his family. Shanus collected baseballs because it was the sport he

loved, and he is just one of many people who collect them for the same reason. Shanus especially enjoyed collecting balls that had historical significance. As of 2017, baseball-related items accounted for about 70% of the vintage sports market, with serious collectors paying up to seven-figures for certain items (Belson).

Zack Hample is a well-known baseball collector and is sometimes referred to as a “ball hawk.” Hample has attended games at 54 different MLB stadiums and has gotten over 100,000 balls. Like Shanus, Hample also placed high value on balls with historical significance; he caught MLB All-Star Mike Trout’s first MLB home run and legendary Alex Rodriguez’s 3000th hit (Hample). Hample caught his first ball when he was twelve, and when he caught that ball, he figured he should just keep collecting them. He now holds a world record for his collection. He has both a website and YouTube channel all about his collection in addition to an extensive gallery of all of his balls. His Twitter profile picture is a photo of him sitting in a bathtub full of balls (see Figure 6). He has sustained multiple injuries in collecting, including a bruise from a collision with an armrest, a cracked rib, a sprained ankle, and a black eye. Hample truly reflects a collecting culture that is also seen through countless items at antique malls and auctions (Wiedman).

To even further emphasize the collecting culture built through baseballs, as of 2014, the McKenney family of Florida had a ball signed by every player who played in a Rays uniform since 1998, the team’s first season. That number totaled 415 players as of that year. Their dedication to collecting baseballs showed, especially when Jennifer, the daughter of the family, drove 14 hours while racing a hurricane to obtain a signature from someone who was only in the Major League for one day (Apstein). When baseball first became a sport, people had no idea that

the ball's function would diffuse into culture the way that it has. Baseballs have affected culture in that they are widely collected and necessary for the sport, but they also influence a part of the economy in how much historical baseballs are auctioned for.

In 1999, Missouri memorabilia dealer Mike Barnes offered \$100,000 cash in advance to the fan who caught first baseman Mark McGwire's 500th career home run ball. His plan was to auction the ball and give the proceeds to the person who caught it, which he estimated would be around \$500,000. In return, he would receive 10% of the proceeds (Kadlec). This was just one of many baseballs that have been auctioned for large sums of money. Collector culture does not end with collecting; many collectors or ball hawks will sell or pay incredible amounts of money for historical balls, as mentioned before in the cases of Corey Shanus and Zack Hample.

When Mark McGwire hit his 70th home run of the 1998 season, a toy company owner paid three million dollars for the ball. At the time, that was the most money ever paid for a sports artifact (Roy). Other amounts paid for baseballs include \$805,000 for Babe Ruth's 1993 signed All-Star Game ball sold in 2006 and \$752,467.20 for Barry Bonds' 756th home run (Roy). Not only are famous hits collected and sold at unreal prices, but there are other balls that have significance for different reasons. Many baseball fans remember or have heard of the most famous instance of fan interference in Game 6 of the 2003 National League Championship Series between the Chicago Cubs and the Florida Marlins. In the game, Cubs fan Steve Bartman prevented the Cubs outfielder from making a catch, and the Cubs ended up losing the game and the series. The ball was later auctioned and then detonated. It was sold for \$113,824.16 (Roy; see Figure 7). While baseballs are mass produced and easy to find and purchase, many have a specific background story to go with them. People are engrossed in the stories each ball tells,

which is a reason to collect them and to sell them for outrageous prices. Just like other items that people collect, every baseball accumulated has a meaning to someone outside of the sport itself.

There is no one way to interpret an object's meaning to current culture. Since baseballs are still around, one would consider them a contemporary object. While important to both collecting and auctioning, baseballs are mostly integrated into current culture through their use in the sport and sports entertainment. As aforementioned, baseball is often considered America's pastime. In thinking of America and what it means to be American, just like Baltav, Jr.'s quote, some things that come to mind are hot dogs, the Statue of Liberty, pickup trucks, and baseball. In 2018, baseball-related revenues were \$10.3 billion (Brown). This shows that the sport is flourishing. Teams such as the Baltimore Orioles also hope to bring families together through special events such as Father's Day catch on the field ("Orioles Theme Nights"). Major League Baseball hopes to be a family sport in general. My family owns 29-game season tickets to the Baltimore Orioles. My brother and I are six years apart, and baseball is something that brings my family together. My brother also plays Little League baseball, where my father is the manager for his team and my mother and I watch almost every game.

Without the baseball, the United States (and other countries such as Cuba, Japan, and the Dominican Republic) would lose a whole industry. Though the structure and manufacturers of baseballs have changed over the years, one thing remains the same: the intended function, the sport. The sport would not exist without the ball, and neither would the collector's item or the object to auction. Baseball has provided a livelihood for so many players as well as a cohesiveness for families. Though a baseball may mean something different to each person, it has significance to the current culture either way, especially a culture so invested in sports

entertainment. Everything that baseball has become as a sport can be traced back to an object only nine inches in circumference and weighing only five ounces: the baseball.

Appendix



I.

Figure 1: Examples of “Lemon Peel” baseballs. Retrieved from

<https://www.smithsonianmag.com/arts-culture/a-brief-history-of-the-baseball-3685086/?no-ist=>



II.

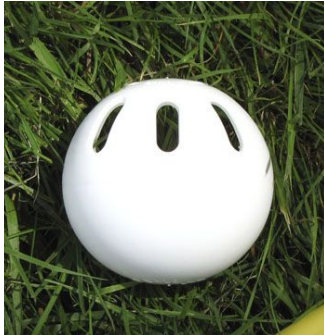
Figure 2: The baseball that Major League Baseball uses today with the “Official Major League Baseball” stamp imprinted. Retrieved from

www.rawlings.com/product/ROMLB.html.



III.

Figure 3: Baseball used by Little League with “Little League” stamp imprinted. Photo by George Clary.



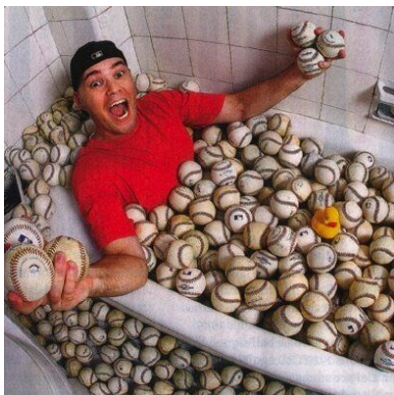
IV.

Figure 4: Side view of a wiffle ball. Retrieved from www.wiffle.com



V.

Figure 5: Cricket ball. Retrieved from <https://cricketwarehouse.com.au/products/bal007a>



VI.

Figure 6: Collector Zack Hample in a bathtub full of baseballs. Retrieved from

https://twitter.com/zack_hample?ref_src=twsrc%5Egoogle%7Ctwcamp%5Eserp%7Ctwg%5Eauthor



VII.

Figure 7: The baseball caught by Steve Bartman, later detonated. Retrieved from

<https://www.therichest.com/sports/baseball-sports/top-10-most-interesting-baseballs-sold-at-auction/>

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