Heta Aali, Anna-Leena Perämäki, Cathleen Sarti (eds.)

Memory Boxes

An Experimental Approach to Cultural Transfer in History, 1500-2000
Heta Aali, Anna-Leena Perämäki, Cathleen Sarti (eds.)
Memory Boxes

(in collaboration with Jörg Rogge and Hannu Salmi)
Editorial

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CONTENTS

Preface | 9

Memory Boxes
An Experimental Approach to Cultural Transfer in History, 1500–2000
JÖRG ROGGE, HANNU SALMI | 11

TOPOI

Topoi as a Memory Box
KRISTINA MÜLLER-BONGARD, ASKO NIVALA, CATHLEEN SARTI,
ALEXANDRA SCHÄFER | 21

How to Visualise an Event that is not Representable?
The Topos of Massacre in François Dubois’
St. Bartholomew’s Day Massacre
ALEXANDRA SCHÄFER | 27

The Topos of Martyrdom as a Memory Box
The Book of Martyrs by John Foxe and the Fresco Cycle at San
Tomaso di Canterbury
KRISTINA MÜLLER-BONGARD | 55
The Topos of Golden Age in Friedrich Schlegel’s Notion of Cultural Transfer from Antiquity to Early Nineteenth-Century Germany
ASKO NIVALA | 79

Providence
The Making of a Religious-political Memory Box
CATHLEEN SARTI | 93

PERSONALITIES

Personalities as a Memory Box
HETA AALI | 109

The Personality of Queen Clotilde in Early Nineteenth-Century France
HETA AALI | 113

Henry the Lion – Enrico Leone
A Precious Memory Box of the House of Brunswick
MATTHIAS SCHNETTGER | 131

ARTEFACTS

Artefacts as a Memory Box
ANNA-LEENA PERÄMÄKI | 151
Becoming of a Memory Box: the Kalevala
Sung Poetry, Printed Word and National Identity
JUHANA SAARELAINEN | 155

Encapsulating Visions of Nationhood
Finland (1911) as a Memory Box
HANNU SALMI | 177

Diaries, Material Memory Holders
Creating a Memory Box
ANNA-LEENA PERÄMÄKI | 195

“We wanted a parliament but they gave us a stone”
The Coronation Stone of the Scots as a Memory Box in the Twentieth Century
JÖRG ROGGE | 219

An Epilogue
Reflections on Working with the Concept of Memory Box
CATHLEEN SARTI, ALEXANDRA SCHÄFER | 239

List of Contributors | 241
Preface

This book is the result of a cultural and scientific exchange between the members of the Department of Cultural History at the University of Turku (Finland) and the members of the Special Research Unit “Historical Cultural Sciences” at the Johannes Gutenberg University in Mainz (Germany).

This binational project started in 2011 and was funded by the Academy of Finland and the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD) in 2012 and 2013. The funding enabled us to organise two meetings of the project group in Turku and in Mainz each year.

We like to thank DAAD and the Academy of Finland for their financial support. We also thank the Special Research Unit at Mainz University and the Cultural History Department of the University of Turku for providing additional resources during the project and the publishing of this volume.

On behalf of the project group
Jörg Rogge (Mainz) and Hannu Salmi (Turku)
Memory Boxes
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JÖRG ROGGE AND HANNU SALMI

A memory box, or a keepsake box, is associated with romantic fiction and childhood culture. It has often been a wooden chest, made for storing mementos. As cultural artefacts memory boxes have their own long history; they can be interpreted as artefactual expressions of the self, as vehicles of memory as well as transmitters of material reminiscences of the past to the future.

In her book Cultural Memory and Western Civilization (2011, originally published as Erinnerungsräume, 1999) Aleida Assmann points out that the Latin word for box is arca, the ark, which, as in the case of Noah’s Ark, can be interpreted as a safe refuge. The Israelites, in turn, took the Ark of the Covenant with them into the desert in order to be able to preserve the Ten Commandments.1 The ark, like a memory box, is a portable container that can be used to transmit memories.

It seems that, towards the end of the nineteenth century, the term memory box also gained allegorical layers and the human mind was often described as a box. In 1890, The Leeds Mercury reported on a strange recovery of memory. The editor wrote:

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1 ASSMANN, 2011, pp. 101f.
Physicians are, I believe, able to adduce many cases in which people whose minds have, owing to some sudden shock, become, so to speak, a total blank as regards events which happened before the blow fell which upset the balance on their memory box, have had their recollections all at once restored by some old familiar sight or sound supplying the key-note, as it were, of the long-forgotten tune.²

Here, the human brain is like a box of memories, a fragile chest that can be emptied by a sudden shock.

Despite the fact that the history of keepsake boxes would be fascinating in its own right, this book is based on the metaphorical use of the term. The major motive for this book is the fact that a memory box offers ample possibilities for experimentation. As already the concrete use of the word refers to something (memory) being isolated from its surroundings (box) in order to make it portable, it seems possible to apply the idea of memory box in the analysis of cultural transfer. Since a memory box is a container of memories, or includes material references to memory, it can be a means for cultural transfer not only between borders in a social and geographical sense but also for temporal shifts from the past to the present and from the present to the future. Cultural transfer is often viewed from the perspective of synchronic displacements, but the notion of a memory box would also set this synchronic movement into the context of diachronic transfer.

Aleida Assmann points out, that places of memory should not be studied merely on a temporal, vertical axis, as something that derive from the past and prove to be meaningful for the future: memories also have horizontal ramifications. It is important to question the kind of spatial and material manifestations memories have. Assmann considers memory boxes to be “objects in which important documents are preserved”.³ In the book Cultural Exchange in Early Modern Europe (2007), the German historian Bernd Roeck also refers to these materialisations in arguing that “there are instances of Erinnerungsschachteln (packets or boxes of memories): every artefact was a container which already contained legacies from the past when it was being made”.⁴

² THE LEEDS MERCURY, 12 April 1890.
⁴ ROECK, 2006, p. 11.
Before going further, it is important to relate these thoughts to recent debates on cultural interaction. It seems that there has been a gradual change in the key concepts employed by researchers of the field. Notions such as cultural diffusion, assimilation and acculturation have been replaced to a large extent by more interactive concepts, like cultural transfer, cultural translation, cultural interaction and cultural exchange. The movements between cultures are, more often than not, seen as cases of two-way traffic than unidirectional influences. The historian Peter Burke has emphasised the notion of *transculturation*, which was originally coined by the Cuban sociologist and folklorist Fernando Ortiz. Burke stresses reciprocal interaction between cultures, intercultural traffic where influences transgress borders in a two-way manner. The emphasis on transcultural seems to be more flexible than the concept of *transnational* that has become increasingly popular during the last decades. As the historian of technology, Erik van der Vleuten, has pointed out there are different uses of the concept transnational, stressing such features as fluidity, circulation and flow as well as connections and relationships. Still, transnationalism is obviously bound together by the notions of nation and nationality and therefore cannot be applied to older history without problems. Thus, the book at hand focuses on the transcultural rather than the transnational.

Burke further supported the idea of cultural hybridity in history, the fact that there have always been flows over borders. There are manifold examples of cultural artefacts that cannot be considered as products of one single culture: they are hybrids. On other hand, in order to be able to argue that there can be such things as cultural hybrids in the first place, there has to be an assumption that cultures are entities with boundaries that can be deciphered. And, further, if there are boundaries, there must be various transfer processes between cultures.

Bernd Roeck made an effort to conceptualise transfer processes in cultural interactions. As Roeck defines, cultural transfer refers to “something that has been ‘transferred’ from one culture to another – a process with an active giver and a completely passive receiver”, while cultural exchange implies a “more dynamic process involving an interaction between ‘giver’ and ‘receiver’”. To

6 Burke, 1997, p. 158.
7 Van der Vleuten, 2008, p. 978.
8 Burke, 2009.
9 Roeck, 2007, pp. 3f.
be sure, the concept of cultural transfer can be separated from the notion of cultural exchange which covers the wide array of material and immaterial flows over borders. The essential feature is not the traffic itself but the fact that cultures are transformed, and continuously transform themselves, by and with these interactions.

There are, however, two remarks to be made. In contrast to Roeck’s view, cultural transfer does not necessarily imply an “active sender” or a “passive recipient”. Transfer can be seen as a general concept that refers to any kind of cultural displacement: something may be transferred without active impetus, but on the other hand it may entail two-way or perhaps even multi-centred flows. This is important from the perspective of memory box as a theoretical and methodological tool: in our view, the box is an agent of cultural displacement. Again, the very notions of cultural transfer and cultural exchange seem to suggest that cultures are not open by definition but entities with borders to be transgressed.

Usually, cultural exchange and transfer have been studied as synchronic processes on a horizontal level by concentrating on those cultural entities that exist simultaneously. Here, cultural negotiation can happen on multiple levels, as suggested by the recent discussion on \textit{histoire croisée}.\textsuperscript{10} The aim of this collection is, however, to expand the notion of cultural transfer so that it applies also to the traffic between past and present cultures or different layers of temporality in the past. If cultural transfer is seen as an event that has its spatial ramifications in history, it also has to have an itinerary and thus a dimension in time. It is crucial to acknowledge that exchange has always a temporal perspective and, thus, can be interpreted as diachronic, vertical transfer.

In the case of past and present cultures it may of course be argued that the traffic has to be unilateral by nature, the past being able to transfer things to the future, while the present phenomena cannot be transferred to the past. Still, it is intriguing to consider those situations when, through historical writing and historical imagination, the present transfers its own cultural features into the past where they are etched into the image of the past to such an extent that these cultural representations again are seen to influence what later came into being.

In order to be able to combine the analysis of both horizontal and vertical transfers, this book covers different geographical areas in Europe and North

\textsuperscript{10} \textsc{Werner/Zimmermann}, 2006, pp. 30-50.