

“Timeless, Schmimeless”

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“This is the beginning. I’m writing about the beginning, but it’s not really the beginning, it’s the beginning of the end. I’m at the end, but I’m saying you’re at the beginning and so you’re at the beginning with me, but I’m also at the end without you. There’s distance between us. A gulf, a gap. This is the beginning. Or isn’t. Or is it?” {*The Indestructible Chaos of Timeless Things*, pg. 3}

Mr. President, Mr. Secretary/Treasurer, Members of the Society:

When prompted to describe myself for my Facebook profile, I wrote, “I am the most unusual normal person I know.” Not ‘normal unusual.’ ‘Unusual normal.’ I enjoy the obscure. To my inner-Machiavelli, comprehending the ‘means’ is the only way to truly grasp the ‘end.’ At the same time, I’m a huge fan of statistics. Concrete numbers that definitely prove something.

I am frequently drawn more to the ‘why’ than I am the ‘who, what, when, where, or how.’ In my opinion, the ‘subjective,’ if you will, often reveals the ‘objective.’ The ‘obscure’ often underlying the ‘obvious.’

Contradiction? Or comprehensive?

Regardless, the aforementioned opening lines to Bruce Gatenby’s *The Indestructible Chaos of Timeless Things* struck a chord with my seemingly dichotomous mindset... And certainly got my brain-train rolling. As such, I present to you:

“*Timeless, Schmimeless*”

Nicholas de Wolff, a self-described “Former Rag Trade Slave,” while writing for the ‘Fashion and Style’ column of the *Quora* website, was asked the question, “What makes something timeless?” His answer is as follows:

“...there are really two questions here: (1) what makes something retain its social, market, or financial value over time? (2) what makes something retain its emotional and personal value to its owner over time? Since the first question is far less complex, I’m opting to answer that one as best I can:

The passage of time, the relative value (market, social, or otherwise) of that particular ‘something’ before and after said passage of time, and the projection for how the value will continue to evolve, if graphed out indefinitely, tend to position an element as potentially ‘classic’.

At a certain point in time, one should be able to look backward over the history of the 'something', and discern its value arc. If the 'something' in question has largely maintained, or even enhanced its value over time, it could be deemed to be irrefutably classic and, if its design value remains high and unchanged, timeless.

The 'something' under scrutiny may possess a core value that maintains its general market position and resell strength, but if a redesign or other 'reworking' is required, in order for new generations of buyers to connect with the 'something', it cannot be considered timeless. Timelessness by its very definition refers to something unaffected and unchanged by time." {*What Makes Something Timeless*, November 29, 2010}

When coupled with Gatenby's preponderance of time, however, one must ask the question:

"Whose time?"

The last century? Since written records? For perpetuity?

Consider this: Most trace the origin of the tuxedo to the 2nd-half of the 19th century in England. Today, the ol' "penguin suit" is considered a timeless look. Would Caesar, who lived well-before the 1800's agree with this, though? Would an Aborigine, who wears little to no clothes, sport the black satin suit for its allure and appeal? Of course not.

My point is, the term 'timeless' is a bit of a misnomer... At least relatively speaking. The value and variability of an object is, for the vast majority of the time, dependent upon the standards and desires of the era and area in which it's created. And, since time is constantly moving forward, only something that was created with (or, if we're really into semantics, before) 'time,' and remained unchanged for eternity, could be timeless.

As such, let's attempt to correctly classify items that have previously been dubbed 'timeless.' I believe this can be done with 3 categories:

- 1) Items we think are timeless, but, in fact, are not;
- 2) Items that are timeless, but only to a specific time period; and
- 3) Items that are truly timeless.

In terms of the former, a cursory search for "Lists of Timeless Things" shows many items that 'will never go out of style' or are 'popular'... But not necessarily 'timeless.' Items like leather jackets, martinis, even karaoke.

Let's look first at leather jackets. Animal hides have been used for clothing, protection, and even housing for millennia. Most don't credit the popularity of 'bombers,' however, until after fighter pilots wore them in the World Wars.

Even more recently, James Bond took the martini to new levels with his ordering habits in the high-action, gadget and villain-filled movies of the past 5 decades.

And who doesn't enjoy a good sing-along. Whether people are gathered around the campfire singing "Kumbaya," rocking a bar-of-soap-microphone in the shower alone, or waving lighters with 30,000 other adoring fans at a Willie Nelson concert, everyone tests their vocal range and lyrical repertoire at some point. Enter karaoke. A compound of Japanese "kara" (meaning, "empty") and "ōkesutora" ("orchestra"), this late night bar game is certainly a hit with Cindy Lauper wannabes and Asian businessmen, alike. Nonetheless, with a concept first popularized in the early 1960's by the gameshow *Sing Along with Mitch*, and the first "karaoke boxes" produced in the 70's, it's hard to label this fad 'timeless.' ['Tireless,' maybe!]

Speaking of which, let's not belabor these newfangled misconstruisms. Let's now turn our attention to items that are timeless, to a specific time period, at least. Or - with enough research - can be traced to a specific era or, even, person; yet, have been around long enough that the modern world has always known of, or assumed, their existence.

Like most of you, I had no idea what I was going to write my paper on until about 48 hours before it was supposed to be presented. Nothing. Nada. Zilch. Zero. Zero? If anything is timeless, it has to be zero, right? Black/White. Stop/Go. Something/Nothing. Not the case, though. In fact, it wasn't until 650 A.D. that Indian mathematician, Brahmagupta, was able to illustrate zero by using addition and subtraction equations.

Speaking of Athenaeum papers, perhaps many of you have enlisted the age-old pro/con list to either come up with an idea, or, at the very least, while weighing arguments for your illiteration. Surely, Native Americans thought, "Is the meat on this bear worth the fight of killing it?" Modern politicians, obviously, ask, "What will be the thoughts of my constituents vs. what are the desires of my major donors?" Pros and cons. Timeless, right? Well... Timeless from 1772 to the present, at least.

In a letter to Joseph Priestly, Benjamin Franklin described his process for coming to a decision; and, in turn, christened the "Pro-Con List." Franklin wrote: "divide half a Sheet of Paper by a Line into two Columns, writing over the one Pro, and over the other Con. Then during three or four Days Consideration I put down under the different Heads short

Hints of the different Motives that at different Times occur to me for or against the Measure. When I have thus got them all together in one View, I endeavour to estimate their respective Weights; and where I find two, one on each side, that seem equal, I strike them both out: If I find a Reason pro equal to some two Reasons con, I strike out the three. If I judge some two Reasons con equal to some three Reasons pro, I strike out the five; and thus proceeding I find at length where the Ballance lies; and if after a Day or two of farther Consideration nothing new that is of Importance occurs on either side, I come to a Determination accordingly.”

So, if figures and terms can be dated, what about more generalized descriptives? Is ‘ambition’ an eternal characteristic? Is it timeless? Yes. And no.

Man has been ambitious since the beginning of time. In fact, Adam and Eve were so ambitious they ended up being overly-ambitious; and the rest, of course, is history. And that same history led us to the middle ages, where most scholars believe the *War of the Roses* gave rise to upward upward mobility. Heretofore, familial birth determined your social status. Although, with virtually every member of the royal families dead, feudal underlings now had the ability to act on their desires. As the Latin “ambire” alludes, ambitious people could “go out and canvass for votes.” Or, as Evan Puschak, opines in *Timeless Things that aren't Really Timeless*, one of his video blogs: “Ambition is only as old as the social ladder is... Before the 16th century, social position was [believed to be] ordained by God, and classes were hermetically-sealed parts. Nobody not born there could get in, or even entertain the idea of doing so... But when the middle ages ended and modernity dawned, the English word “ambition” enters common usage as something positive to legitimize and reinforce the social climbing of the new world. Fast forward to today, and it’s impossible to imagine office spaces without [catchphrase] posters like [‘Ambition,’ ‘Courage,’ or ‘Teamwork’].” {*the nerdwriter*, September 22, 2014}

Sorry, Rosie the Riveter. My apologies, Olympics. Superbowl? Got nothing for you. Disappearo, Harry Potter. The Beatles, who? All ‘iconic,’ but none, indeed, timeless.

Thus, what really is timeless? Or, for that matter, is anything truly timeless? It’s been said that our thoughts are the source of everything. “Necessity is the mother of invention,” if you will. Gatenby attests, however, while speaking about his book: “If our thoughts are the source of all, then they are also the source of our thoughts. Behind the words are thoughts, words form out of thoughts, *here* forms out of words, but thoughts, thoughts form out of thoughts, self-creating and self-referential? What is their source if thoughts are not the source of all? To truly understand truth, to truly understand *stories*, we have to go there, but we cannot go there, to the source of all, we cannot go beyond the

borders of thought, back to the origin of thought, here no there, there no here. Thought is, or isn't. Is it? Or isn't it?" (pg. 38 & 39)

In the end, I propose that there are very few genuinely timeless things. Items, terms, actions, inherencies that every human has and experiences since time immemorial. Things such as thought (and, perhaps, imagination). Love (and sex). Eating, drinking, and sleeping. Perhaps this is the reason many people today are shedding themselves of excess, looking to Mother Nature, and returning to their roots. Paleo-style diets, tiny homes, non-GMO farming, herbal medicines, natural building and clothing materials.

Maybe the wise sage, Baloo, from *The Jungle Book*, had it all figured out, when he mentored Mowgli with: "don't spend your time lookin' around / For something you want that can't be found / When you find out you can live without it / And go along not thinkin' about it / I'll tell you something true / The bare necessities of life will come to you."

The bare necessities? Hmm...

Using de Wolff's definition of 'timelessness' ("something unaffected and unchanged by time"), and the definition of 'necessity' ("the fact of being required or indispensable"), could it be the only thing that's timeless is 'time'?

Is it? Or isn't it?