

# The Boston Globe

## These are just a few of their quirkiest things Mining meaning in a Harvard exhibit of unrelated objects

By [Sebastian Smee](#)

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A Gutenberg Bible, a taxidermy giraffe, a collection of glass flowers, scads of great paintings by Van Gogh, Monet, and Picasso: Harvard's got them all, and the world knows it.

What they don't necessarily know is that there are millions of other, mostly forgotten objects in Harvard's voluminous holdings. Accumulated over four centuries, the majority of them spend their lives in darkness — in the drawers and cabinets and climate-controlled storage rooms of the university's nearly 50 distinct collections.

It's a pity, because some of these objects are more than just remarkable: They're downright charismatic.

Recognizing this, some experienced hands at Harvard recently embarked on an ambitious project to rescue more than 200 of them from obscurity. The result is "Tangible Things," a multivenue exhibition of some of the most fascinating, beguiling, and frankly bizarre things you will ever see.

In some cases, the things in question derive their charisma from their association with famous names (call these the "celebrity objects.") The blue "commander-in-chief" sash worn by George Washington, for instance. A painter's palette that belonged to John Singer Sargent. A microscope owned by Mark Twain (from when he was writing the "autobiography" of a cholera germ). A bronze cast of a life mask of Abraham Lincoln. Or a turtle collected by Henry David Thoreau.

Others generate excitement because of their palpable connection to history. It's thrilling, for instance, to read the handwritten instructions given to Benjamin Franklin, Silas Deane, and Thomas Jefferson in advance of their mission to negotiate a treaty with France. (Jefferson, in the event, stayed home.)

Though the story is more circuitous, it's just as engaging to look at a group of glass bottles containing brightly colored chemicals, knowing that they were intended for the Medical College of Alabama but came to Boston when the ship carrying them was seized by a Union vessel during the Civil War.

And there are plenty of objects that relate to more recent history, including a silkscreen poster from 1972 — the height of the Women's Liberation movement — announcing "Women are not chicks."

But many other objects have a charisma that's not so easy to pin down.

As if conscious of this, and of the fact that context can play a major role in the way we think about objects, the curators of "Tangible Things," — Laurel Thatcher Ulrich and Ivan Gaskell, along with Sara Schechner and Sarah Anne Carter — decided to get creative with the display.

The core of the show can be found in the Putnam Gallery in the Science Center, just off Harvard Yard. At first, the display, which has been divided according to traditional curatorial categories, seems to follow a fairly predictable pattern.

There's "Books and Manuscripts," for instance, where you can see a copy of John Ashbery's seminal 1975 collection of poems, "Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror" dedicated to his poet friend, Elizabeth Bishop. You can also see a private letter written to "my dear sister Bessie" in 1855, which is remarkable because the lines fill the page diagonally in both directions, forming a kind of calligraphic cross-hatching. (The idea, it seems, was not only to save on postage but to discourage casual reading of private correspondence.)