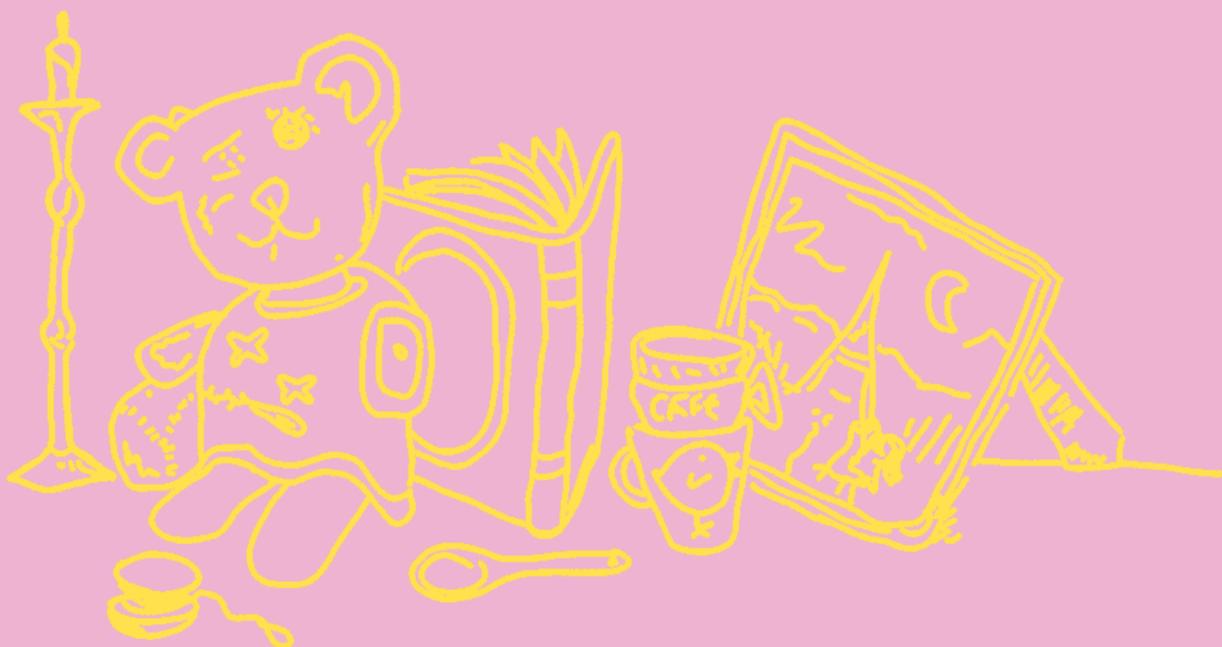


# In the Future, We Will Create a Typology for Thrift Store\* Tags

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\*Translation Note: For my UK friends, a “thrift store” is the American equivalent to your “charity shop”.

Imagine, if you will...

In the year 3020 P.C.C. (the post-climate change era, of course), both humanoid and non-humanoid archaeologists alike have begun a major intergalactic excavation project located in key areas around the Planet Earth. Using 21st century texts, the researchers have identified spaces referred to as ‘thrift shops’, a type of economic space in which specially curated artefacts from the past are sold in exchange for the local currency. Despite textual evidence of their existence, archaeologists have remained baffled at the intended purpose of these sites. “Early excavations that occurred in the late 2990’s recovered a diverse assemblage of artefactual evidence from these so-called thrifting spaces, including votive figures, pottery, iron work, and even traces of cloth. However, it is unclear of what purpose they may have held, and what their value was. Based on preliminary analysis, it appears that these objects may vary wildly with regards to their regional and temporal provinces. Frankly, without textual evidence, I would have assumed that this site was a landfill. Perhaps what we consider rubbish was much more valuable in the past?” said project director Dr. Xylem Zexel. This project intends to further investigate the possible socio-economic importance behind these spaces by developing a typological approach to identifying and analysing the various artefacts found in thrift stores across the planet.

As an archaeologist in the year 2020, I can only imagine the grief that is felt over the contextually mess that would be the thrift store for my future colleagues. Intermingling of contexts is already a frustrating problem for current day

archaeologists – but imagine the horror that would face you within a thrift store? It is perhaps the only place in the world where kitschy bowling shirts from the 1960’s are sold alongside t-shirts from a church fundraising event from 2010, or where antique brass candelabras can be on sale for the same price as a homemade picture frame made of glue and glitter. Thrift stores are museums of contradictions, exhibiting the well-loved and the never-opened, the secular and the somewhat holy, the utilitarian and the otherwise decorative – it is the nightmare of an archaeologist looking to develop neat, succinct categories of artefacts.

And maybe that is exactly why there has yet to be any substantial archaeological work on the thrift store as artefactual accumulation; this is a shame, of course, as the thrift store could be a fruitful space for theorising new approaches towards archaeological investigation and excavation. As Dawid Kobialka (2013) wrote shortly after the music video premiere of Macklemore’s hit song “Thrift Shop”, “thrift shops are, as it were, cultural heritage sites in which are staged and saved artefacts from the past, usually from the ’80s and ’90s. They will soon certainly become of interest for archaeologists too. They are places in which the past meets the present. They are about inclusive heritage where most of us can afford to buy something from the past.”

Thrift stores are not only places of contradictions, but as Kobialka has described, they are also places of liminality. Past and present collide, not only through the literal age of objects, but also in accumulation of objects as well; artefactual deposits become a new type of material culture. And yet, we cannot say that these are reused objects either, not until they are sold. This is where the liminality of the space comes in, representing the potential that these artefacts have for reuse and reincorporation into the living assemblage through what Michael Schiffer (2010, p. 38) has referred to as the “reclamation process”.

With the proper tools and methodological approaches, I could imagine that thrift stores may become a wealth of information for future archaeologists. YouTuber and thrift store aficionado Clint Basinger (2019) has remarked in a previous episode of his YouTube series LGR Thrifts how these stores most likely received an increase in donated goods in January 2019 – not only because it is the post-holiday season, but also because of the release of the Netflix series *Tidying Up with Marie Kondo*. Thrift stores can reflect broader trends of the general public, from what’s in fashion to technological progresses (see: the amount of VHS tapes, DVDs, vinyl records, and CDs that are constantly on sale). And yet, there is also something very intimate reflected in the thrift store assemblage as well – a wayward family photo in an unwanted frame, someone’s high school art project that was accidentally donated to the local shop.

In many ways, the thrift store reflects the greater goals of archaeology as a discipline, in which we develop the bigger picture of the past, but also take time to examine the smaller threads of everyday lives.

I’m not entirely sure how our future colleagues will tackle the interwoven narratives of the thrift store archaeological site, but I’ll admit that I envy them, as there is so much to be extrapolated from a thorough analysis of such a mixed assemblage. That said, to those future archaeologists, here’s a tip – those tags found on the artefacts? They’re often colour-coded to indicate price. I think it’s 50% off blue tag items on Tuesdays!

#### References:

- Basinger, C., 2019. LGR Thrifts (Episode 42) Gears of Joy. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=p8hCwQmqu5M>.
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