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DECAY

OLIVER WUNSCH

In July 1800, a committee of Harvard administrators met to survey the condition of the college's collections. "The committee found the Museum in neat order," according to its report, declaring that most items were "in pretty good preservation." Pretty good, but not perfect. The inspectors observed, as they had noted almost every year over the previous decade, that some objects had given way to age and rot. To deal with the problem, the committee offered a simple solution: pieces that "were in decay ... might be removed."[1]

Readers today might balk at the casualness with which the early caretakers of the collections banished objects to the rubbish heap. No conservation lab awaited artwork in distress, and no motion-activated alarms protected precious specimens from the injurious reach of visitors. On the contrary, students and faculty actively handled the holdings in the course of teaching and research, meaning that a certain level of destruction was to be expected. Early college records provide a glimpse into these activities and help explain why many objects in the collections at that time no longer survive today.[2] Annual reports can read like a comedy of errors, such

as the note from 1790 about "a skeleton which was broken the past fall when in the hands of the anatomical professor."[3] A good year involved only a modicum of wreckage, as was reported in 1802, "a few articles only having been broken in the necessary experiments."[4]

From the standpoint of the modern museum, it is tempting to mourn these casualties of the past, to regard them as missing pieces of a history that we now strive to locate and preserve. But part of that history was its acceptance of loss, its sense that not all pieces of a collection were destined for posterity. Our contemporary impulse to preserve everything in our collections may therefore run counter to the very history that we seek to save. In protecting history's artifacts, we can inadvertently destroy the historical attitude that people once maintained toward those objects, an attitude permissive of material decay.

Changes in this attitude had already begun to appear by the late 18th century, a moment of growing American consciousness about the role that collections could play in shaping the nascent nation's history. The Massachusetts Historical Society, for example, was founded in 1791 for "the preservation of books, pamphlets, manuscripts and records ... to rescue the true history of this country from the ravages of time."[5] Likewise, the American Antiquarian Society was established in 1812 with the hope that it would "not only retard the ravages of time, but preserve from other causes of destruction many precious relicks of antiquity, many specimens of the work of nature, and those of modern art, which once lost could never be restored."[6] Harvard's collection came with no comparable mandate, but it was hardly unaffected by this rising concern for posterity. Such future-mindedness emerged uneasily alongside the college's everyday encounters with decay, the natural and accidental destruction that resulted when objects were integrated into daily life rather than safeguarded for history. A closer look at the treatment of a range of these objects—ones as diverse as a bird, a rock, and a plaster bust—makes clear some of the conflicts that resulted. Taken together, they remind us that loss may not always be as deplorable as it seems, and that preservation often entails sacrifices of its own.

ARRESTING NATURE

Of all the objects vulnerable to decay in Harvard's early collections, few succumbed to it so readily as the taxidermy specimens. Dead animals played an important role in Harvard's late 18th-century curriculum, particularly after 1788, when physician and medical instructor Benjamin Waterhouse began offering the college's first courses in natural history.[7] Waterhouse delivered his lectures in the Philosophy Chamber, where he also kept an expanding collection of animal specimens necessary for his demonstrations.[8] No pieces from this veritable menagerie survive today, nor did any of them stand much chance of doing so. As Waterhouse's collection grew, it simultaneously fell apart, ravaged by human touch and natural putrefaction.

A July 1791 report from the Library Committee offers a typical lament: "Four birds belonging to the museum have been destroyed by the vermin, notwithstanding that the librarian, who is the keeper of that room has used his utmost endeavors to preserve them."[9] The pests continued to feast on the collection in the following years, as documented in the minutes from the Board of Overseers meeting from May 1793: "The sea otter, which was decaying last year, hath been quite destroyed by vermin."[10]

Such nuisances were hardly unique to Harvard. Taxidermy was an imperfect art, and naturalists continuously searched for reliable preservatives. Immersion in an alcohol solution offered the most dependable option (Fig. 1), a technique that was pioneered by European naturalists in the late 17th century and that soon became widespread.[11] Hence, a "curious present of an alligator" donated to Harvard in 1778 came "preserved in spirits."[12] Members of the college faculty appear to have practiced

Fig. 1 Frederik Ruysch, *Wet Specimens, Including a Squid and Its Ovaries at Left and a Fish (Perca amboinensis) at Right*, engraving from *Thesaurus animalium primus* (1710). Ernst Mayr Library, Museum of Comparative Zoology, Harvard University.

this method of preservation themselves, judging from the sincere thanks that administrators offered in 1779 for a donation of "three gallons of high wines for preserving curiosities in the Museum."[13] This approach, however, came with significant disadvantages. It was most effective on specimens that remained soaking in jars, which interfered with their close examination and manipulation. The alcohol and glass containers were also expensive, and their use proved especially impractical for larger items.[14] For these reasons, many animals from the period were instead treated with a dusting of dry insecticides such as ground pepper or tobacco, allowing them to remain out in the open and readily handled.[15]

These dry methods involved a tradeoff in durability. As pest deterrents, their effects were short-lived. They also left animals vulnerable to mold and other microorganisms, particularly in damp or humid environments. One naturalist complained to the Royal Society of London in 1770 about the fate of birds preserved with salt, pepper, and alum: "They never fail to become humid in moist air and long continued wet weather; suffer the flesh to rot, and even corrode the wires made use of to confine the birds in their natural attitudes, till the whole drops to pieces on the least touch or motion."[16] Almost no dry specimens from this period survived longer than a few decades.[17]

By the end of the 18th century, however, exceptions to this rule began to emerge as naturalists modernized their chemical treatments. Foremost among them was artist and collector Charles Willson Peale, who started applying arsenic to the mounted birds in his Philadelphia Museum in the early 1790s.[18] Arsenic had long before acquired a reputation as a deadly poison, but it was only in the second half of the 18th century that taxidermists considered its use for embalming animals.[19] European naturalists were the first to recognize this application, but Peale went furthest in demonstrating its dramatic potential.[20] His technique, done properly, did little to deform the appearance of specimens, which could be preserved in animated poses. An American bald eagle that Peale mounted in the early 19th century—and which found its way to Harvard's Museum of Comparative Zoology a century later—testifies to the lifelike effect (Plate 51).[21]

Peale's desire to preserve such specimens stemmed from more than the practical nuisance of their replacement. He regarded his museum (Fig. 2) in increasingly historical terms, describing it as "a lasting honor and benefit to America, and a successful rival to the boasted Museums of Europe."[22] His ambitions blended natural history with national history, a combination that explains Peale's particular concern for native species such as the bald eagle, which had been incorporated into the country's Great Seal at the Continental Congress in 1782 (Fig. 3). Peale spoke proudly of his ability to preserve "native productions and curiosities of this country … for the instruction of posterity."[23]

The notion that natural specimens constituted national patrimony, however, was not universally shared among Peale's contemporaries. He struggled to train

Fig. 2 Charles Willson Peale, *The Artist in His Museum*, 1822. Oil on canvas, 263.5 × 202.9 cm (103¾ × 79⅞ in.). Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, Philadelphia, Gift of Mrs. Sarah Harrison (The Joseph Harrison, Jr. Collection), 1878.1.2.

Fig. 3 Charles Thompson, *Design for the Verso of the Great Seal of the United States*, 1782. National Archives, Washington, D.C., Papers of the Continental Congress, 595257.

the visitors to his museum to see his birds as precious artifacts destined for future generations, not as working objects meant to be manipulated. He complained about those "who will not reflect on the consequences of improperly meddling with delicate subjects."[24] The fact that he treated his birds with arsenic, he also pointed out, made the issue a matter of public safety. He began displaying signs: "Do not touch the birds for they are covered with arsenic poison."[25] He found, however, that even this notice did not prevent visitors from "stroking the animals with their hands in a thoughtless manner," and he finally resolved to put all such fragile objects behind glass.[26]

Peale's museum, in this sense, stands as something of a counterpoint to the collections at Harvard, where taxidermy's ephemerality seems to have been more or less taken for granted through the end of the 18th century. At least some aspects of the new preservation practices, however, found their way to Cambridge during this time. When Harvard offered its sincere thanks to English physician John Coakley Lettsom in 1795 for his donation of "two quadrupeds and ten birds," special acknowledgment was made of the fact that they arrived in "glazed cases."[27] One wonders whether these specimens were subsequently allowed to leave their protective enclosures for demonstration and handling. Like the other animals in the collection from this time, they have since disappeared.

Fig. 4 Horatio King, *Seth Eastman on Dighton Rock*, 1853. Daguerreotype, 10 × 13 cm (3 15/16 × 5 1/8 in.). Massachusetts Historical Society, Boston, Photo 1.029 (featured in the exhibition).

SETTING HISTORY IN STONE

The overseers of Harvard's collections may not have regarded taxidermy with the same sense of historical veneration that Peale brought to his specimens, but this is not to say that they were entirely indifferent to issues of national patrimony. As the 18th century progressed, scholars at Harvard showed a growing interest in American heritage and its material condition. Their concerns took shape around unusual examples, and few objects elicited more varied reactions than an 11-foot-long boulder known as Dighton Rock (Fig. 4). Elsewhere in this volume, Ethan Lasser and Jennifer Roberts have shown how cryptic carvings on the rock's surface came to play a central role in Harvard's Philosophy Chamber, where Professor Stephen Sewall's life-size drawing of the markings from 1768 hung high on a wall (Plate 16). The rock itself sat 40 miles south of Boston, partly submerged in the tidal waters of the Taunton River. Roberts chronicles how New England's most esteemed thinkers made pilgrimages to the site

in order to study the lines on the rock's surface, the indecipherable incisions testing their Enlightenment faith in the powers of empirical observation. But as scholars from Harvard and beyond struggled to determine the origin and meaning of the rock's markings, a new problem slowly presented itself: what should be done to ensure the rock's preservation, if anything?

Dighton Rock sat exposed to the climatic extremes of New England's shoreline, alternately engulfed by waves and parched by sun. Few of its early visitors, however, expressed much worry about the potential damage wreaked by these conditions. This lack of concern was no doubt partly attributable to initial beliefs about the rock's significance. The earliest commentators on Dighton Rock in the 17th century suspected that native inhabitants had carved the lines on its surface. In 1680, local minister John Danforth offered the first known interpretation of the markings, which he attempted to decipher according to "the tradition of old Indians."[28] He reported that the "hieroglyphicall" forms represented a shipwreck and a coastal inlet.[29]

Interpretations of the rock's meaning, however, soon began to change, and attitudes toward its preservation evolved with them. In the aftermath of bloody conflicts between English settlers and the region's indigenous population in the late 17th century, colonists promulgated theories of Native American degeneracy that seemed incompatible with Dighton Rock's sophisticated craftsmanship.[30] When Harvard graduate and Puritan minister Cotton Mather brought renewed attention to the carvings in a sermon that he published in 1690, he made no mention of their possible indigenous origins, describing them simply as one of the "curiosities of New-England."[31] Isaac Greenwood, the first Hollis Professor of Mathematics and Natural Philosophy at Harvard, explicitly rejected the notion that the rock was a Native American artifact when he examined it in 1730. "Natives of this country," he asserted, "were altogether ignorant of sculpture and the use of iron."[32] He claimed that their stone instruments could never carve such forms, and he further believed that Native Americans were "too idle and irresolute for a work of so much industry and apparent design."[33] Presenting his own drawing of the rock, he called attention to the "parallellism and conformity of the stroakes [*sic*]," suggesting that they might in fact be "oriental characters." The racism of Greenwood's claims hardly lessened their influence. Over the next half century, Dighton Rock was increasingly regarded as a vestige from an ancient Eurasian civilization's intercontinental voyages, a precious piece of America's past that its newest inhabitants felt worthy of embrace.

In the years after the American Revolution, these theories would come to be taken as fact, gradually transforming the rock from a curious puzzle into a supposedly unparalleled relic of remote antiquity that needed to be rescued for generations to come. As the emergent nation sought to secure the narrative of its history, traces of a far-flung past seemed to offer a foundation on which to construct a glorious future. It was in this spirit that Yale's president, Ezra Stiles, gave Dighton Rock an important role in his 1783 sermon entitled "The United States Elevated to Glory and Honor," which famously outlined a theory of American exceptionalism based on biblical history.[34] Stiles had begun puzzling over Dighton Rock nearly two decades earlier, making multiple drawings of it in the summer of 1767 (Fig. 5). It was only after the revolution, however, that he felt compelled to assign the rock a fixed historical meaning, incorporating it into a providential narrative of America's destiny. He cited the inscriptions in support of his argument that the United States fulfilled a biblical prophecy, one in which white colonists were descended from Noah and Native Americans were preordained to be their slaves. Stiles claimed that the country's indigenous residents were, in fact, cursed children of Canaan who had reached the American continent on Phoenician ships. Dighton Rock, in this account, became an important piece of material evidence for those ancient voyages. Stiles proclaimed in his sermon that he had seen with his own eyes the work of those "Phoenicians, who charged the Dighton rock and other rocks in Narragansett-bay with Punic inscriptions, remaining to this day."[35]

The more historical weight was placed upon the rock, the more its material decomposition became the subject of concern. The possible effects of time and decay on the inscriptions had long been noted. Greenwood wrote in 1730 about the rock's gradual effacement, mentioning that a local resident of 30 years had noticed "some alteration since his memory."[36] But Greenwood and other early commentators cited this decay primarily as an impediment to deciphering the characters, not so much as a problem for posterity.[37] It was in the 1780s, after the story of the rock had been repurposed to suit the needs of national history, that the question of conservation first invited serious discussion. Professor Sewall at Harvard remarked on the rock's sorry state in a 1781 letter to Antoine Court de Gébelin, a French pastor and mythologist who had supported American independence. Gébelin responded by calling for Dighton Rock's immediate preservation, expressing hope that his American colleagues would "take measures most proper for the conservation of such an illustrious antiquity."[38]

Curiously, it seems to have been European commentators who initially expressed the greatest shock that such a supposedly remarkable fragment of ancient American culture should be allowed to languish at a river's shore, open to vandalism and natural degradation. When English traveler and writer Edward Augustus Kendal visited Dighton Rock in 1807, he worried that wharf builders or treasure hunters might break it to pieces. Echoing the logic of cultural stewardship used to justify the pillaging of Greek and Roman antiquities, he bemoaned that the local residents failed to honor and care properly for the noble relic. "The rock and its inscription are but little valued in their own neighborhood," he wrote, adding that "it is robbed even of the veneration entertained by all men for antiquity."[39] He

recommended its transport to a Boston collection, where it would be spared natural or human destruction.

This moment marked a significant turning point in the historical understanding of Dighton Rock's value. No longer was the rock seen simply as a bearer of information, prized for the secrets within its inscriptions. For Kendal, there was something crucial and irreducible about the physical experience of the material thing itself. He argued that no drawing could ever capture the subtlety or ambiguity of its forms. "Every man will see something different," Kendal wrote. "Under these circumstances," he insisted, "no perfect copy can be made."[40] And though the rock's Rorschach-like quality might seem to undermine its historical significance, Kendal took just the opposite position. It was this indefinable experience, the affective encounter with the object, that needed to be saved.

Kendal acknowledged that he was "little sanguine" about the prospect of decoding the rock's message, but argued no less strenuously for its preservation. "Whatever be its origin or signification," he maintained, "it belongs to the history of America, and perhaps to that of the world."[41] The information encoded in its surface might be forever lost, but Kendal insisted that its value involved more than the inscription's meaning. Some pieces of the past, he suggested, might be worth saving not because of all that we know about them, but because of everything that we no longer do.

In the following years, Kendal's calls to preserve the rock found growing support among his American counterparts. "It is probably the most remarkable relick of antiquity in North America," one of them declared in 1824, "and it ought to be secured, so that it may be perpetuated."[42] Moving the rock, however, posed its own challenges—Kendal wondered whether it might be better to saw off its face instead of attempting to transport the 40-ton boulder as a whole. The fact that such actions might constitute precisely the kind of marauding vandalism that they were supposedly meant to prevent was an irony apparently lost on the men who made the proposals. Nor did these men express any concern that the rock's importance was connected to its setting, which would be stripped away in any move.

Various plans to relocate the rock would have to wait until 1963, when a team of engineers finally managed to extract it from the tidal waters (Fig. 6). An effort to dislodge it the previous year failed when a chain winch slipped and left a scar on the rock's surface, but careful planning ensured that the second attempt went more smoothly.[43] Dighton Rock currently rests near its original site within a dedicated museum, where debates continue over the meaning of its markings. It now stands less as a monument to its unknown creators than as testimony to the Sisyphean efforts of those men who sought to mobilize and secure it for a nation in need of a past. American history, whether real or imagined,

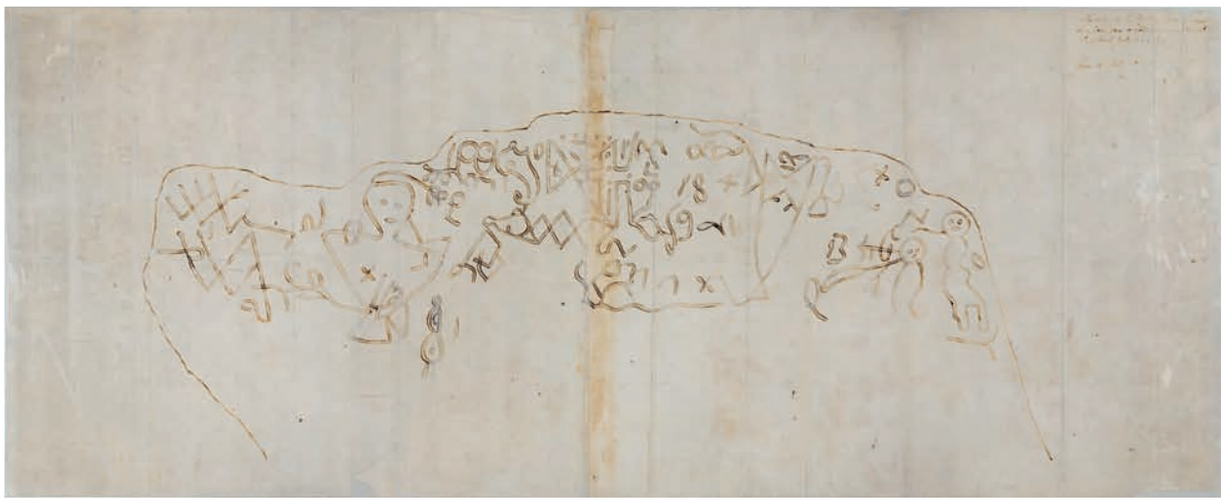

Fig. 5 Ezra Stiles, *Dighton Rock*, 1767. Ink on paper, 32.5 × 56 cm (12 13/16 × 22 1/16 in.). Massachusetts Historical Society, Boston, Graphics-L Artwork 061 (featured in the exhibition).

demanded durable objects on which to rest. And what attempt to preserve them was not worth the cost?

RECASTING THE PAST

Efforts to appropriate and salvage ancient heritage for the new nation were hardly limited to the banks of the Taunton River, or even to the American continent. The theory of Dighton Rock's Phoenician history was just one example of an expanding attempt to find points of contact with distant civilizations. The pretext that these lines of inheritance might be discovered on American soil soon gave way to more speculative lineages. American intellectuals increasingly assimilated Roman and Greek antiquity into their own history, with scant regard to genealogy. The sense of connection to these ancient cultures was based less on a belief in a direct relationship than the idea of an "imagined affinity," the conviction that the Classical world offered a precedent and guide to contemporary events.[44] Through the end of the 18th century, students at Harvard and other American institutions of higher learning explored this connection through Classical texts, devoting much of their day to Latin and Greek grammar.[45] In the early decades of the 19th century, instructors gradually broadened their attention to the wider sphere of Classical life, granting the arts greater importance. These scholars built upon an antiquarian tradition established in Europe in the middle of the 18th century, one that placed new importance on material objects as repositories of historical information.[46] Surviving traces of antiquity such as coins, statues, and vases became subjects of heightened scrutiny, and with this attention came a greater concern for matters of permanence and preservation.

These objects were, of course, mere fragments of the cultures that they commemorated. As such, they could conjure both the presence of the ancient world and its absence. They fit into a broader historical narrative, prevalent at the moment of the United States' founding, that the rise of great civilizations was prelude to their fall.[47] In this context, an ancient Roman statue could simultaneously serve as model and warning to Americans, offering a symbol of cultural achievement and a reminder of all that could be lost.

Among the pieces of this lost world to enter the Philosophy Chamber were three plaster busts (Fig. 7, Plate 72) from one of antiquity's most lauded sculptures, *Laocoön and His Sons* (Fig. 8). The original statue, excavated in Rome in 1506, was one of the many treasures that French soldiers brought back to Paris in 1798 after

Fig. 6 *Dighton Rock Being Moved by Crane*, August 6, 1963. Photograph. Massachusetts Department of Conservation and Recreation Archives.

a

b

Fig. 7a and 7b Jean-André Getti, manufactured by Musée du Louvre Atelier de Moulage, *Head of One of Laocoön's Sons, after the Antique*, c. 1803. Painted plaster and inset lead, left: 41 × 27 × 19 cm (16⅛ × 10⅝ × 7½ in.); right: 44.5 × 32.5 × 20 cm (17½ × 12¹³⁄₁₆ × 7⅞ in.). Harvard University Portrait Collection, P12.B (left), P12.C (right) (both featured in the exhibition).

their invasion of Italy. The French soon began selling plaster casts of their plunder, issuing reproductions of the Laocoön group as early as 1800.[48] American institutions, from art academies to teaching cabinets, were quick to buy the casts, proudly announcing their acquisitions in the local press. A complete cast of the *Laocoön* arrived in Philadelphia in March 1803.[49] Busts from the sculpture, which were cheaper to acquire and transport than the entire statue, were more widely disseminated. They first appeared in Boston by September 1803, when the city's Columbian Museum heralded their arrival, inviting "amateurs of the fine arts" to inspect them.[50]

Harvard began to acquire its plaster casts of antiquities in the following few years. The first known donation came in 1806, when a certain Mr. Richard C. Derby presented the college with busts of Homer, Demosthenes, Socrates, and Nero, "moulded from antique statues."[51] It remains unclear whether Harvard obtained its Laocoön busts around this time or at a later date—the first mention of them in a college inventory does not appear until 1828.[52] The document indicates that the college had amassed a substantial collection of casts in the early 19th century, many of which were likely displayed in Harvard Hall. They included the heads of antiquity's most celebrated thinkers and statesmen, from Pythagoras to Seneca.[53] Also among them was the head of the famed *Apollo Belvedere*, a statue long venerated as a paragon of Classical aesthetics. Casts such as this one, along with the Laocoön busts, were

Fig. 8 *Laocoön and His Sons*, c. 27 BCE–68 CE. Marble, 208 × 163 × 112 cm (81⅞ × 64³⁄₁₆ × 44⅛ in.). Vatican Museums.

as significant for their artistic execution as they were for their subject matter.

For an emerging group of Classical scholars, these objects performed an important pedagogical function. Edward Everett, whom Harvard appointed Professor of Greek Literature in 1815, extolled the way casts offered students a sense of immediate contact with the past. "There is no medium of another language through which we must penetrate," he wrote, "and with the exception of a few points … we are prepared to see such a work, as it was seen by the ancients themselves."[54] Though he was a language instructor, Everett lamented that it was ultimately "impossible to know perfectly more than one tongue," and he therefore suggested that objects might provide easier access to history than texts. He described foreign languages as "a sort of misty veil before our minds, which we cannot draw away, and which gives a vagueness to all that is seen through it."[55] Material objects, by contrast, seemed to allow students to gaze upon history with clear eyes.

The only trouble with this approach to history was that the objects that enabled it were few and far between. As Everett noted of ancient sculpture, "[S]carce anything has escaped the ravages of time."[56] Material culture offered a sense of contact and continuity with the past, but it also elicited an awareness of rupture and ruin, a sense of mourning over all that was irretrievably lost.

The *Laocoön*, for Everett, particularly conjured these ghostly absences. Everett had travelled to see Europe's greatest ancient attractions, partaking in the edifying pleasures of a Grand Tour like so many men associated with the Philosophy Chamber. But the place in Rome where the *Laocoön* once stood especially affected him, leaving him somewhat melancholic. He visited the site in November 1818, and the occasion inspired him to write an elegiac letter to Harvard's president, John Kirkland. What especially struck Everett was the thought that so few objects from these sites had escaped the destructive effects of time. Though the *Laocoön* endured, Everett noted to Kirkland that its survival was the exception rather than the rule: "[T]he statue of Laocoön is the only one preserved of which the ancients themselves speak, considering it certain that this is the Laocoön mentioned by Pliny." The statue's significance, for Everett, lay less in its own merits than in what it conveyed about all the comparable artifacts that had been lost or destroyed. He explained to Kirkland that we can only begin to imagine the sculptures of antiquity's most illustrious artists by consulting these pieces that remain: "If they engage so much admiration, what should we have felt for the works of Praxiteles and Phidias?"[57]

Everett derived this concern for material loss from the rising art historical consciousness in Europe at the time. He was a devoted reader of German scholar Johann Winckelmann, whose texts served as a foundation for the discipline of art history. Of particular interest to Everett was what he described as Winckelmann's "learned and judicious dissertation on the causes of the destruction of the works of ancient art in Rome."[58] In his landmark study of Greek and Roman antiquities from 1764, Winckelmann had compared his despair over lost antiquities to the doleful feeling of a maiden watching her lover set sail, never to return. "Like the beloved maiden," he wrote, "we have, as it were, only a silhouette left of the object of our desires."[59]

Writers like Winckelmann, in dwelling on such losses, helped inaugurate the modern museological concern for conservation. It was a preoccupation that would come to make collections such as the one that had existed at Harvard—with its tacit compromises between preservation and destruction—impossible to sustain.

For all of Everett's dedication to Winckelmann's thinking, however, it was clear to him that this growing concern for loss might cause its own problems. In the spring of 1819, Everett pondered the material life of objects while visiting the ruins of Herculaneum and Pompeii, cities halted in time by the eruption of Mount Vesuvius in 79 CE. He could hardly believe how many artifacts survived thanks to the preservative effects of lava and ash. His mind then turned to the preservation of his own culture. In a letter to family back in Boston, he wondered what traces of their lives would remain for generations to come: "Notwithstanding our art of printing, and all our means … of transmitting an idea of ourselves to posterity, I doubt whether 2000 years hence they will have as much knowledge of us, in this way, as we gain by these discoveries of the ancient cities."[60] The irony that a cataclysmic volcanic eruption might offer one's best chance for reaching posterity did not escape Everett. He wryly expressed his hope that "other volcanoes should kindly do the same office to our followers as Vesuvius has done to us, and send us down to posterity embalmed in cinders and lava."[61] Perfect preservation, Everett seemed to recognize, might not be all that different from total annihilation.

And in this thought lies a tension that persists in our museums today. The objects that endure under the watchful eyes of guards, conservators, and curators do so at a far remove from the animated world of the past that they allow us to imagine. They may provide a glimpse into an old life, but only because they have been separated from it. Whether we gaze upon the pristine plumage of a stuffed bird, the cryptic markings on a hulking boulder, or the intricate forms of a plaster bust, we ought to remember that their survival comes at a cost. Nothing can be spared life's tumult while remaining fully present within it.

In this sense, decay and loss need not always merit our mourning. Many of the objects that once populated Harvard's shelves and walls may no longer survive, but their destruction served a purpose, supporting the vital operations of a collection whose meaning and value was inseparable from its use. The objects that no longer survive may, in the end, be the ones that were allowed to live.

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1
Entry from July 10, 1800, Records of the Board of Overseers, vol. 4, Harvard University Archives, UAII 5.5, p. 309.

2
On the estimated size and content of the early collections, see the introduction to this volume.

3
Entry from October 5, 1790, Records of the Board of Overseers, vol. 4, p. 56.

4
Entry from October 25, 1802, in *College Book 8*, Harvard University Archives, UAI 5.5, p. 501.

5
Proceedings of the Massachusetts Historical Society 1 (1791): 1.

6
Isaiah Thomas, "An Account of the American Antiquarian Society," *Transactions and Collections of the American Antiquarian Society* 1 (1820): 30–31.

7
The Harvard Corporation voted on April 29, 1788, that "Dr. Waterhouse deliver annually a course of lectures upon Natural History to such students as shall obtain permission under the hand of their parents or guardians to attend"; see *College Book 8*, 255–56.

8
William Coolidge Lane, "Benjamin Waterhouse and Harvard University," *Proceedings of the Cambridge Historical Society* 4 (1909): 5–22.

9
College Book 8, 322.

10
Records of the Board of Overseers, vol. 4, 127.

11
John E. Simmons, *Fluid Preservation: A Comprehensive Reference* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 2014), 3–25.

12
College Book 8, 17.

13
See notes from a meeting of the Harvard Corporation on November 16, 1779, in ibid., 38.

14
Simmons, *Fluid Preservation*, 11.

15
Robert McCracken Peck, "Preserving Nature for Study and Display," in *Stuffing Birds, Pressing Plants, Shaping Knowledge: Natural History in North America, 1730–1860*, ed. Sue Ann Prince (Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society, 2003), 15.

16
T. S. Kuckahn, "Four Letters from Mr. T. S. Kuckhan [*sic*], to the President and Members of the Royal Society, on the Preservation of Dead Birds," *Philosophical Transactions* 60 (1770): 303.

17
Peck, "Preserving Nature for Study and Display," 15.

18
Peale describes his use of arsenic in a diary entry from May 18, 1790; see Charles Willson Peale, *The Selected Papers of Charles Willson Peale and His Family, Volume 1: Charles Willson Peale: Artist in Revolutionary America, 1735–1791*, ed. Lillian B. Miller (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1983), 563.

19
Fernando Marte, A. Péquignot, and D. W. Von Endt, "Arsenic in Taxidermy Collections: History, Detection, and Management," *Collection Forum* 21 (2006): 143–50.

20
French naturalist and apothecary Jean-Baptiste Bécoeur began using arsenic to preserve birds as early as the 1770s; see Paul Lawrence Farber, "The Development of Taxidermy and the History of Ornithology," *Isis* 68 (4) (1977): 550–66.

21
Peale's museum was dissolved in 1846. The eagle, along with much of the collection, was then acquired by Moses Kimball for his Boston Museum. The Boston Museum's zoological specimens, including Peale's eagle, went to the Museum of Comparative Zoology in 1914. See Walter Faxon, "Relics of Peale's Museum," *Bulletin of the Museum of Comparative Zoology at Harvard College* 59 (3) (July 1915).

22
Charles Willson Peale, *The Selected Papers of Charles Willson Peale and His Family, Volume 5: The Autobiography of Charles Willson Peale*, ed. Lillian B. Miller (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2000), 207.

23
Ibid., 206.

24
Ibid., 223.

25
Ibid.

26
Peale started ordering glass cases in July 1787. See ibid.

27
The cases themselves were slightly damaged on arrival, and special arrangements were made for their repair. See *College Book 8*, 383.

28
Danforth's remarks are reproduced in Edmund Burke Delabarre, "Early Interest in Dighton Rock," *Publications of the Colonial Society of Massachusetts* 18 (1916): 291.

29
Ibid.

30
Douglas Hunter has argued that King Philip's War and the continuing violence on the frontier left colonists unwilling or unable to recognize Dighton Rock's indigenous origins. See his invaluable Ph.D. dissertation on Dighton Rock and the historical dispossession of the country's indigenous population, "Stone of Power: Dighton Rock, Colonization, and the Erasure of an Indigenous Past," York University, 2015.

31
Cotton Mather, *The Wonderful Works of God Commemorated* (Boston: S. Green, 1690).

32
Greenwood's full letter on Dighton Rock to the Royal Society is reproduced in Delabarre, "Early Interest in Dighton Rock," 290.

33
Ibid.

34
Ezra Stiles, *The United States Elevated to Glory and Honor* (New Haven, Conn.: Thomas & Samuel Green, 1783).

35
Stiles refers to his own examination of the rock as well as the analysis of Professor Sewall; see ibid., 12–13. Stiles apparently did not actually believe his own explanation for the rock's ancient origins, expressing doubts in his private writings; see Cora Lutz, "Ezra Stiles and the Challenge of the Dighton 'Writing Rock,'" *The Yale University Library Gazette* 55 (1) (1980): 19.

36
Quoted in Delabarre, "Early Interest in Dighton Rock," 289.

37
On the various reports of decay, see Edmund Burke Delabarre, *Recent History of Dighton Rock* (Cambridge, Mass.: J. Wilson and Son, 1919), 408–9.

38
Antoine Court de Gébelin, "Observations sur le monument américain," in *Monde primitif* (Paris: 1781), 568.

39
E. A. Kendal, "Account of the Writing-Rock in Taunton River," *Memoirs of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences* 3 (1) (January 1809): 190–91.

40
Ibid., 189.

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Ibid., 190.

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Joseph White Moulton and John Van Ness Yates, *History of the State of New-York: Including Its Aboriginal and Colonial Annals* (New York: A. T. Goodrich, 1824), 86.

43
"The Enshrining of Dighton Rock," *The Boston Globe*, June 30, 1963.

44
On the idea of an "imagined affinity," see Joseph M. Levine, *The Battle of the Books: History and Literature in the Augustan Age* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1994), 7. For its role in American thought during this time, see Caroline Winterer, *The Culture of Classicism: Ancient Greece and Rome in American Intellectual Life, 1780–1910* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002), 18–19.

45
Winterer, *Culture of Classicism*, 29–43.

46
For the classic overview of this development, see Arnaldo Momigliano, "Ancient History and the Antiquarian," *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 13 (3/4) (January 1950): 285–315.

47
Stow Persons, "The Cyclical Theory of History in Eighteenth Century America," *American Quarterly* 6 (2) (July 1954): 147–63. For the broader intellectual origins of the preoccupation with instability and decline in the Early Republic, see also J. G. A. Pocock, *The Machiavellian Moment: Florentine Political Thought and the Atlantic Republican Tradition* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1975).

48
Florence Rionnet, *L'atelier de moulage du Musée du Louvre, 1794–1928* (Paris: Editions de la Réunion des musées nationaux, 1996), 9.

49
The cast was destined for the New York Academy of Arts; see the notice of its arrival published in *The Morning Chronicle*, March 16, 1803.

50
"The Columbian Museum," *Columbian Centinel & Massachusetts Federalist*, September 24, 1803.

51
The Harvard Corporation offered its thanks to Derby for his donation at its meeting on May 14, 1806; see *College Book 9*, Harvard University Archives, UAII 5.5, p. 72.

52
Benjamin Peirce, "Inventory of the Personal Property of Harvard University in the Custody of the Librarian," February 14, 1828, Harvard University Archives, UA III 50.15.70.4.

53
Ibid.

54
Edward Everett, "Ueber die Epochen der bildenden Kunst unter den Griechen," *The North American Review* 12 (1821): 187.

55
Ibid.

56
Ibid.

57
Letter from Edward Everett to President Kirkland, November 29, 1818, in *Edward Everett Letter Book*, Houghton Library, Harvard University, MS Am 1742, 31.

58
Edward Everett, "On an Inscription from the Columbarium of the Freedmen and Slaves of Livia Augusta," *Memoirs of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences* 4 (1) (January 1818): 399.

59
Johann Joachim Winckelmann, *Geschichte der Kunst des Alterthums* (Dresden, Germany: In der Waltherischen Hof-Buchhandlung, 1764), 430. On the silhouette as a symbol of absence and loss, see Jennifer Roberts's contribution to this volume.

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Letter from Edward Everett to brother-in-law Nathan Hale, March 8 and 9, 1819, in *Edward Everett Letter Book*, 138.

61
Ibid.