TANGIBLE THINGS

Making History through Objects

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Tangible Things
INTRODUCTION

Thinking with Things

How can we approach aspects of the past that written words do not record? How can we mobilize not just a few kinds of things that have survived from earlier times, but many, to create history? If we acknowledge that material things of many kinds are traces of the past, how can we make use of them to understand the past? What are the circumstances that shape our encounters with them, and how do those circumstances affect—perhaps even determine—how we might use them? As historians working with material things, these are among the puzzles we face. These are our concerns in this book.

We did not write this book in isolation. It represents the culmination to date of a long-term investigation. It reports on an experiment we conducted at Harvard University in the spring of 2011 involving the use of material things of many kinds—from medical specimens to artworks. The fact that we did it at Harvard does not mean that others cannot try their own experiments with less extensive collections. The issues involved are certainly not confined to one institution, nor do we believe that one need have access to a world-class collection in order to employ the strategies it adapted.

We have discovered through our own experiences as writers, researchers, museum curators, college professors, and leaders of workshops for museum professionals, public school teachers, and the general public that focusing on a single object can generate excitement, prompt historical curiosity, and produce understanding. Of course, having access to a dazzling set of material things is a great advantage, but as television
programs like *Antiques Roadshow* or the *History Detectives* remind us, dazzling things sometimes show up in ordinary places, and, as good poets know, common objects when looked at anew have a dazzle of their own.

*Tangible Things* builds upon a rich tradition of practice and theory in material culture, as well as on our own experiences as scholars and teachers. Specialists will recognize in these pages a number of issues that have been debated in universities and museums in recent years. Although we have entered into these arguments by offering some philosophical speculations in general terms, we have chosen to focus our efforts in this book primarily through case studies, believing that in many circumstances example really is the best teacher. In contrast to more traditional works, our topic is not the evolution of particular objects or forms over time, but rather a method of investigation that begins with a specific artwork, artifact, or specimen and then moves outward in an ever-widening circle.

The things we discuss are not the unbounded things of recent "thing theory," but rather definite physical entities. To call something a "thing" rather than an "object" in certain disciplines indicates that it may have inanimate or numinous qualities. For these practitioners and philosophers, we recognize that the word "things" evokes resonances that "objects" does not. Although we pay close attention to the nuanced meanings of the material world, we have chosen to adhere to widespread convention and use the terms "object" and "thing" interchangeably.

Because we are historians, our primary approach is historical. But our engagement with tangible things has led us beyond the boundaries of our own discipline and our own specialized knowledge. We want to argue here that just about any tangible thing can be pressed into service as primary historical evidence. Our purpose is not to offer comprehensive accounts of each field to which these sources might relate, but to demonstrate that attention to singular, physical things can reveal connections among people, processes, and forms of inquiry that might otherwise remain unnoticed. Our engagement with Harvard’s collections has led us to question the very categories through which we understand history. It has also led us to imagine a university in which museum specialists and librarians might work more closely with faculty to create more engaging and lively exhibits and courses.

There has been a great deal of emphasis lately on the supposed overspecialization of the academy, on the need for university teachers to teach broadly and for meaning, and for specialists to find a way to address the general public. Although it may seem counterintuitive, we actually think
that a good way to broaden knowledge is to narrow the focus. This is one of the secrets of micro-history. Asking students to study an object—any object—almost always leads them in unexpected directions. To take just two examples, a Harvard undergraduate who had never before shown any interest in biology found herself reading treatises on the foraging habits of mice in order to understand the curious presence of a mouse skeleton in a patent medicine bottle from the American Civil War; and a student in the history of science who wanted only to understand the anatomical theories behind a model of the human body suddenly found that she needed to know something about Greek art.

Teaching with tangible things challenges teachers as much as it challenges their students. None of us is simultaneously an expert in Civil War history and mice. But good teachers know how to use libraries, websites, and their colleagues to guide students into areas they do not know. In our case, that meant working closely with the curators, archivists, conservators, and registrars that care for Harvard’s many collections. Teaching in this manner becomes collaborative at many levels. The kind of open-ended inquiry we model here is much easier today that it would have been in the past. The growing willingness of major institutions, including Harvard, to share texts and images electronically makes it easier to connect written and material sources, and to connect objects housed in one collection with another or with the seemingly ordinary things found in people’s bureau drawers and attics. This is not to claim, though, that electronic versions of texts and other objects are invariably adequate substitutes for the things themselves; many puzzles demand attention to those very things—exalted or commonplace—as well as to their virtual representations.

Our description so far might imply that the Tangible Things project is no more than elaborate antiquarianism: an inspection of individually fascinating items in which anyone might take an interest for their own sake, but of little or no relevance to the big picture of historical inquiry. Can Tangible Things fulfill a truly historical purpose by helping anyone who wants to know about the past in order to live critically in the present? Yes it can. We believe that the mobilization of material things can enhance any comprehensive historical inquiry and that the procedures we advocate will enhance knowledge of the past that is too often constrained by reliance on written materials alone.

Historians generally rely on text-based sources, but these are severely limited. Only a minority of human societies has used writing systems.
Even within those that have, many people left few traces, if any, in written form. Oral traditions can be documented and interviews made, but except in the case of various indigenous societies, these verbal records are of recent memory and do not take us very far back. Historians can extend the range and depth of their inquiries by learning to use not just written and oral accounts, but all traces of the past. With appropriate skills to exploit a wider range of sources—material and visual, as well as word-based culture—historians may uncover what would otherwise be undetectable lives, often of the socially disadvantaged; they will also enrich knowledge of those who have been known to a greater or lesser extent solely from written texts.

What are these material records of the past? They range from portable personal possessions to entire landscapes. They encompass things that are human-made—a medieval ceramic container from Syria—and natural things modified by human behavior, such as a conifer cone from New Guinea bound with straw to retain its integrity. While there may be considerable overlap in the skills historians need to interpret such a wide range of things, each also requires a particular, appropriate mode of address. A taxidermy specimen of a mounted duck-billed platypus actually has much in common with an oil painting on canvas—both are crafted through the artifice of a skilled maker. But, in order to use them as sources, historians must take into account the differences between them, both ontological and in terms of human cognition and use. Even then, such things are scarcely self-sufficient individually. Humans have always dealt with such things in terms of the perceived relationships among them. These relationships often involve using language, whether oral or textual. Material things, then, do not exist entirely independently

1. What can be learned from a water bottle representing a woman with a young child of the Moche people of Peru, ca. 150–800? Pottery portraits in Moche culture appear to represent actual individuals and their social activities. Artworks like this portrait jug frequently depict the flow of water through human bodies, thereby embodying the Moche society’s dependence on irrigation. Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, Harvard University.

3. This specimen cone of the tree *Agathis labillardieri* was artfully bound with plant material, making it more durable and beautiful, by Richard Archbold, who financed and led three biological expeditions to New Guinea in the 1930s. Arnold Arboretum Herbarium, Harvard University Herbaria.

4. A mounted platypus, *Ornithorhynchus anatinus*, is more than a scientific specimen of Australian fauna. It is an engaging example of the taxidermist’s art of stretching skin on a frame to create the appearance of motion and life. Museum of Comparative Zoology.

of texts, spoken or inscribed; but neither can such things be reduced to texts.

How do material things function in human use? Humans gather them, nurture them, walk across them, climb them, kill them, eat them, make them, wear them, tell stories about them, bury them, revere them, destroy them, claim descent from them, forbid them to one another, give them to one another, exchange them, and much more. By manipulating them, humans articulate their own relationships with
5. A tintype photograph of botanists Merritt Lyndon Fernald and George Golding Kennedy posing with their essential field gear for plant collecting in front of a painted backdrop of the outdoors, ca. 1890. Each man holds a trowel, a vasculum (a tin case for carrying fresh specimens), and a portable plant press. Gray Herbarium, Harvard University Herbaria.
6. This cross-section of submarine telegraph cable celebrated the laying of the first permanent telegraph line across the Atlantic Ocean by the British ship Great Eastern in 1866. The little trophy captured people's excitement that new technologies had made the world smaller. A message that once had taken ten days to deliver by ship between Europe and America now took just minutes. Telegraph companies, however, reputedly made greater profits from selling souvenir sections of cable than from transmission fees. General Artemas Ward House Museum.

one another. Various human societies perform all these actions—and more—differently from each other, often in mutually incomprehensible ways. In order to perform all these actions in a repeatable manner, humans distinguish things from one another, name them, and group them. For the most part, however, things are radically unstable. They change physically over time, in their uses by successive human groups, and in their significance to various peoples. A telegraph cable designed to carry messages beneath the Atlantic Ocean can be cut into innumerable slices for souvenirs. To trace an original use or significance is to account for only one period in the life of a thing, a period not necessarily more important than others it might subsequently have had. To ascribe precedence to a maker's intentions or to an object's first use is to fall into a trap of oversimplification. This has happened to many people who have studied material things historically. We do not dismiss intention or first use—far from it—but propose that, even if intention and first use can be reliably established, they constitute just a part of the story.

Although we can sample some of what humans do and have done in relation to the things they choose, make, and use, this project as a whole—and this book in particular—clearly cannot hope to be comprehensive in its examination of these phenomena. Yet we can confidently offer a chart for future navigation and instances (case studies), each one of which may initially appear to be an island, but that in unexpected or even scarcely perceptible ways are all a piece of the continent, a part of the main.

Tangible Things examines a core group of concerns in the study and use of material things: how Westerners have distinguished, named, sorted, grouped, gathered, and subsequently deployed material things in order
7. "Great objects make great minds" is among the quotations that Sarah Henshaw Ward Putnam penned on the pieced quilt, dated 1881, which she sewed for her spinster nieces in Shrewsbury, Massachusetts. Her source was "Night Thoughts" by the eighteenth-century English poet Edward Young. Widowed three months after her wedding, Putnam spent her remaining seventy years shuttling between relatives' homes. The potholder, piecework style of this quilt suited her mobility, but the quotation is poignant as Putnam had few objects of her own. General Artemas Ward House Museum.

to make knowledge claims about both them and the emergent concepts their users have associated with them. These activities are the basis of much Western methodical thinking. Distinguished thinkers have considered them since classical antiquity. Although a great deal of ink has been expended on museums and other collections of things as constitutive of the social order, comparatively little consideration has been given to them as instruments of thought. Our project approaches that topic by exploring how museums aggregate particular selections of material things for the purpose of thinking.

In the nineteenth century, scholars in museums tended to regard the things in their collections as transparent, reliable indicators of reality independent of human cognition. Those who distinguished, gathered, sorted, and named all kinds of tangible things assumed that they were uncovering identities and relationships that existed regardless of what anyone might think about them. Their arrangement constituted actuality. They were, in short, object lessons. From the late nineteenth century and onward, scholars like William James questioned such assumptions and
8. A survey of established facts: Master basket maker Clara Darden wove this basket using river cane from the homelands of the Chitimacha people in southeastern Louisiana between 1900 and 1910. The complex double-weave basket is one basket woven inside another. The interior of the basket is woven from natural cane, and the exterior has the up, across, and down pattern woven in red, black, and undyed cane. The basket's strength, water resistance, and glossy finish derive from silica in the river grass woven into it. Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, Harvard University.

9. When one thinks of Harvard's august Houghton Library, one thinks of rare books and manuscripts, not works of modern art made of jumbled metal kitchen utensils. Resembling a junk drawer, the piece was described by the artist as a metaphor for a fast-paced, disorganized life. Shouldn't this work be in a museum of contemporary art? Houghton Library's curators did not think so. They added it to the library holdings because it was art realized in the form of a book. Artist's book, *Little Chaos*, by Deborah Phillips Chodoff, 1996 (detail), Houghton Library.
introduced the idea that things and human minds are mutually dependent: Things do not function or even exist independently of the way humans think of them. This undercut the intellectual authority of collecting institutions, which formed their collections on the assumption that the ordering they employed conformed to an actuality beyond human contrivance. Additional developments in the twentieth century further undermined the authority of museums. Here the works of French philosophers Michel Foucault (1926–84) and Jean Baudrillard (1929–2007) (who, with their numerous followers and in different ways, examined the contingencies and artifice of human knowledge claims, subordinating all human activity to the conditions of language) are of particular importance. While it remains important to take such works into account, we resist the tendency to confine analysis of tangible things to considerations of language, and the reduction of the institutions that deal with them—museums—to instruments of social control alone. Museums led the way in the development of still-significant fields of inquiry before being superseded by emergent research universities that addressed pure intangibles unconstrained by the relative unwieldiness of material things. However, collections of tangible things—museums—remain not only as scholarly institutions in their own right, however compromised their claims to intellectual authority may be, but also as parts of larger scholarly institutions that are less directly engaged with the public, such as colleges and universities.

Our own work in universities drives us to ask: What place can university and college museums play in the ever-developing research and teaching endeavors of the institutions of which they form parts? Museums bring many challenges, among them the need for the continuing physical care of their collections and physical plants, the difficulty of access, the seeming irrelevance to many active areas of inquiry, and the expense. Most of all, their physical nature and often their scale—Harvard’s Museum of Comparative Zoology alone holds an unfathomable twenty-one million things—render them unavoidably cumbersome. The individual collections at Harvard, like other collections elsewhere, continue to contain—and constrain—these various things in collections that sometimes appear to impede creative inquiry. This state of affairs arose because collections were formed in relation to particular disciplines and academic departments. In recent years, new areas of research and teaching have emerged that challenge traditional disciplinary boundaries. At Harvard and elsewhere, the structures of collections have not kept pace with these changes.
The 2011 *Tangible Things* exhibition at Harvard was the most far-reaching intellectual and practical challenge yet attempted to the relative isolation of the university's collections. It queried the very rationale that continues to structure Harvard's—and many other—methodical collections. The future of academic research and teaching in many fields will depend on far greater permeability among collections than is the case at present. In our own teaching, for example, we needed to bring a Native American riding whip handle from Harvard's General Artemas Ward House Museum into physical conjunction with bison ribs in the Museum of Comparative Zoology and with artifacts made by the nineteenth-century Indigenous inhabitants of Nebraska in the Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology. With such materials, we were able to explore the story of westward expansion of peoples of European origin across North America in the years following the Civil War in a fresh and precise way. If these things—and others both like and very different from them—remain isolated in their disciplinary collections, never
11. One way to overcome the problem of dated categories is to consider new uses for material things and redefinitions of their purposes. For instance, Lydia E. Pinkham's patent medicine remained popular long after her death in 1883 because of clever advertising that appealed to the changing needs of American women. Here Mrs. Pinkham, in a dowdy black dress complete with a bustle and froth of white lace on her bosom, counsels a young office worker, with bobbed hair and finger waves of the 1920s, sitting at her typewriter. Arthur and Elizabeth Schlesinger Library on the History of Women in America.
crossing boundaries, our opportunities to conceive new ideas about the material world in all its richness and variety in a whole host of fields will be curtailed.

Although *Tangible Things* is a history project—the authors are, after all, historians—it is also a plea for and a demonstration of the need for far greater flexibility in the management and deployment of collections of all kinds on behalf of all disciplines that make use of such materials. New ways of sorting and describing these tangible things will facilitate their application to new areas of inquiry. Could new modes of grouping and gathering allow these things to be compatible with new and future requirements of universities and scholarship more generally? Can we overcome the inertia of collections, despite numerical growth, or are they doomed to be just so many expensive and increasingly irrelevant encumbrances? How did organized Western inquiry reach this seeming impasse in respect to tangible things?

Whatever other purposes they may serve, these things and their modes of organization are magnificent sources for historians—when they take the trouble to learn to work with them. Does this use alone justify their

12. In late March 1965, the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. led thousands of civil rights demonstrators on a fifty-four-mile march from Selma, Alabama, to the state capital, Montgomery, to petition for the voting rights of black people. This photograph by Matt Herron—documenting what was hailed as the greatest demonstration in the history of the civil rights movement—is treated today not simply as a historical record but also as fine art. Harvard Art Museums/Fogg Museum.
13. Mundane objects can tell remarkable stories. The toes of these slippers sport the coat of arms of Radcliffe College in needlepoint. The extra-large shoes belonged to Wilbur Kitchener Jordan, the male president of the women’s college from 1943 to 1960. Radcliffe Archives.

retention and cultivation? Probably not. Yet historians, with their particular charge to translate the ever-changing past into the ever-emerging present, are especially well placed to argue for the potential of collections of tangible things in scholarly inquiry. Worthwhile future uses may not resemble past or even present uses. A photograph made to record a contemporary newsworthy event might be redeployed as a historical document recording the particularities of a significant past moment, or as an artwork in recognition of its aesthetic qualities. If collecting institutions are to become more useful as instruments of inquiry, they will have to be more flexible and less exclusionary in both the development of their collections and the uses to which they put them.

We developed the Tangible Things project in order to address these large-scale, consequential puzzles. We used Harvard’s collections as a convenient case study. These particular tangible things, and the collections into which they have been formed, were readily accessible to our students and to us, as well as to visitors interested in exploring our puzzles. Yet there is nothing deferential or celebratory in our choice of the Harvard collections as our focus. Just as much can be done with commonplace or “found” objects treated as traces of the past, wherever they may be. Nonetheless, our use of Harvard’s collections did lend our project an additional dimension. If, for much of its existence, Harvard was an obscure regional school for local gentry and clergy, it emerged in the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries as a place of scholarly competence, renown, and influence, both nationally and internationally. Its patterns of organization, however idiosyncratically formed in individual institutional instances, came to carry weight beyond
14. This homely travel toothbrush folds up into its metal case and is crafted from repurposed implements. It is witness to the growth of dental hygiene in the mid-nineteenth century that led many travelers to carry their own homemade toothbrushes. General Artemas Ward House Museum.

15. The Harvard undergraduate portrayed in these vintage wax candles wears “plus fours,” baggy breeches that were characteristic of Ivy League fashion in the 1930s, when the candles were made. Harvard University Archives.

Cambridge, Massachusetts, and in at least some cases, reflect and affect developments elsewhere.

*Tangible Things* therefore both reflects, and reflects upon, institutional collecting developments consolidated by the late nineteenth century at Harvard and in Western thought and practice more widely. In the Special Exhibition Gallery of the Collection of Historical Scientific Instruments, we placed a wide variety of things within each of the six fundamental categories into which tangible things have frequently been sorted since full-scale institutionalization in the nineteenth century. These correspond not only to Harvard’s division of collection labor, but—broadly speaking—to that of Western societies generally (though, obviously, there are some variations among them both regionally and nationally). Each of these six fundamental categories contains a vast diversity of materials within it, but those materials all exhibit characteristics that make their placement in each category appear plausible, or in many instances, even natural. The categories are *anthropology and archaeology, art, books and*
16. Engraved with a long and wordy tale and mounted as a trophy, this silver teapot no longer brews the hot beverage its owner, Samuel Johnson, so relished. The English lexicographer bequeathed the teapot to his Jamaican companion and valet, Francis Barber, in 1784, but it was purloined by Johnson's executor and sold, as the inscription relates, "at the very Minute" when Dr. Johnson's body was being autopsied in the next room. Houghton Library.

17. An ear of corn is as commonplace as can be, but close examination may reveal beauty in its beaded structure. This cob, harvested in Brazil in 1918, reminds us that corn has been cultivated for more than 6,000 years in the Americas, where it remains the preeminent grain crop. Economic Botany Herbarium of Oakes Ames, Harvard University Herbaria.

manuscripts, history, natural history, and science and medicine. The things we exhibited in these categories are what we describe in the next chapter as “Things in Place.”

In the same gallery, clearly marked to differentiate them from the cases containing the “Things in Place,” we arranged further cases containing arrays of things exhibited without discernible order. In these cases, we created a miscellany that we informally termed our “muddle.” We put a tiger skull near an ancient tortilla, an Australian Aborigine message stick, a Japanese sword and scabbard, an Indonesian accordion-bound manuscript, a Native American quirt (whip) handle, samples of fabric for
enslaved African Americans’ clothing, and a contemporary artist’s book made from kitchen implements.

These things—and others—seemed to have nothing to do with one another beyond the fact of their physicality. Their arrangement issued a friendly, quizzical challenge to the viewer—and to ourselves—that we made explicit by text panels urging visitors to “SORT THEM!” These are the objects we discuss as “Things Unplaced.”

A third feature of the *Tangible Things* project involved exploring the galleries of seven Harvard collections after interlopers from one collection were inserted into the preexisting display of another collection. The seventeen “guest objects” were hidden in plain sight, revealing new aspects of themselves by virtue of being seen in unfamiliar surroundings. The guest objects also exposed and encouraged scrutiny of the basic

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18. This French dagger, ca. 1840s, was exhibited under the category of art and interpreted as an art critic might: To hold this weapon is to take envy into one’s hand, for the figure (on the handle) personifies this emotion. Harvard Art Museums/Fogg Museum.

20. An item in the "muddle": A tiger cranium and jaw is a specimen of *Felis tigris tigris*, but a note inked on the skull—telling us that on the day after Christmas, 1849, this tiger was shot in the head in Hyderabad, India—makes it something more. Museum of Comparative Zoology.

21. How does one classify an unidentified text written on fan-folded sheets of palm leaves bound in wood? As a herbarium specimen of economic botany, an Indonesian ethnographic object, or a book illustrating the widespread use of accordion bindings from India to China and Southeast Asia? Houghton Library.

22. A tiger skull, a Japanese sword, a book made of palm leaves, an artist's book of metal kitchen tools, a riding-whip handle, a hundred-year-old tortilla, and the tapeworm of a Boston Brahmin are some of the items clustered in this "muddled" case in the 2011 exhibition *Tangible Things* at the Collection of Historical Scientific Instruments, Harvard University.
23. Although this armillary ring sundial made in Lucca, Italy, in 1764 was displayed as a "thing out of place" to be sorted, it belonged to a rich traveler who could use it to find true north, his location, and the time at any latitude. Collection of Historical Scientific Instruments.

assumptions underlying each host display. We examine this aspect of the project in "Things out of Place."

"Things in Stories—Stories in Things" examines the way the undergraduate general education course *Tangible Things: Harvard's Collections in World History* employed objects to tell stories about Harvard's relation
to the wider world. We also look at some of the stories habitually told in Western society—especially in America—about these things and the people associated with them, and show how new stories emerge. These objects and their entangled stories offer proof that the study of particular things can lead to far-reaching historical discoveries by revealing patterns, relationships, and complexities that would otherwise remain hidden.

In the chapters that follow, we explore the structure of the *Tangible Things* exhibition in further detail, looking at the categories we identified, the “muddle” of things we chose and assembled, the interventions we contrived with guest objects at their various locations, and the stories told through and from things. We undertook this exhibition not to produce a tidy, finished product—as is usually the case with museum exhibitions—but rather to extend a process of investigation pursuable only by means of the assembly of the objects concerned. The exhibition was truly an experiment, the results of which we could not possibly foretell. Therefore, rather than produce an anticipatory catalog, the common museum practice, we chose to write about it—here—only after we had had the opportunity to take our observations of the many juxtapositions and interventions in the exhibition itself into account. We offer case studies of tangible things, each of which opens a portal to the past, but each of which also carries a promise for the future as we explore how the radical instability of tangible things transcends the collections that have sought to contain them. We seek to do all this confident that these things will present us, and our successors, with fresh opportunities to develop both historical understanding and innovation in a wide variety of fields.
By the end of the nineteenth century, collecting institutions had defined the categories into which they conventionally sorted all kinds of tangible things. The assistant secretary of the Smithsonian in charge of the United States National Museum, George Brown Goode, laid them out methodically in his 1895 publication *Principles of Museum Administration*. Goode’s categories were as follows: “A. Museums of Art; B. Historical Museums; C. Anthropological Museums; D. Natural History Museums; E. Technological Museums; F. Commercial Museums.” With the exception of the last category—commercial museums—this schema still applies to the majority of Western collecting institutions, including those at Harvard.

The Harvard Art Museums (comprising the Fogg Museum, the Busch-Reisinger Museum, and the Arthur M. Sackler Museum) correspond precisely to Goode’s category A. (The Fogg contains European and American art; the Busch-Reisinger deals with art of the German-speaking lands; and the Sackler holds art from classical antiquity and Asia.) The Harvard University Archives, the Radcliffe Archives, the Arthur and Elizabeth Schlesinger Library on the History of Women in America, and the General Artemas Ward House Museum conform to category B, though the latter is the one history museum at Harvard that addresses only issues beyond Harvard and Radcliffe. Together the Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology and the Semitic Museum encompass anthropology and archaeology, Goode’s category C. The Museum of Comparative Zoology, the Mineralogical and Geological Museum, and the Harvard University Herbaria clearly correspond to category D.