

Did 21st century man comprehend the cyclical nature of the year?

A study of holidays in Dollarware ceramics

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Abstract: This project first sought to pinpoint the day of purchase based on Western holiday-themed mugs, however, with further research, mug assemblages were found to have clusters of particular holidays. This created an additional temporal dimension, making it possible to identify past, present, and forward looking assemblages and connect those to spatially-oriented sites. The findings of this study have interesting anthropological implications for consumer buying patterns and further raise the issue of temporality in archaeological assemblages.

Introduction; in which the problem is identified.

The original question asked in this research was whether it is feasible or accurate or both to determine the date of purchase by number of calendrical-themed mugs in assemblages, predicted to be mugs primarily associated with major Western secular holidays. The broader implications of what seems, at first glance, to be a rather frivolous project are more interesting, namely the investigation of the relationship between calendrically-stable holidays and a particular type of material culture – do the two interact? If so, how? And how does this interaction manifest itself in the archaeological record?

Previous literature on this topic was not readily available. In dealing with ceramic material remains associated with holidays, there has been previous research done in the field of marketing studies on consumer purchasing, most predominantly in the context of Christmas shopping. However, there has apparently been no such studies of contemporary ceramics associated with holidays; as the marketing literature trends towards such traditional gifts as jewelry and clothes. Turning to the archaeological and anthropological literature, there is an abundance of work done on gift-giving and holidays, however most anthropological work studying material acquisition in a holiday context tends to focus on non-Western societies, making it less appropriate to the scope of this research project.

Literature available on modern-day gift-giving focuses on marketing and business angles, rather than from an explicit anthropological tack. However, buying habits of consumers around holidays is often discussed in a particular anthropological fashion, as covered below in the area “discussion”.

Methods; in which the problem is evaluated and lists are made.

At first, it was necessary to determine whether or not it was feasible to tackle this project. As there are 289 mugs total in the combined assemblages and 35 seasonally themed mugs, making holiday-themed mugs 12.1% of the total collection. This percentage was deemed significant enough to study holiday mugs as a separate category. From there, a typological classification scheme, created jointly by colleagues all working on iconographic projects, was applied to all mugs. Mugs falling under the header of “holiday”, defined as solely calendrically absolute days which fell on the same day every year or around the same time, were further grouped into sub-categories based on the multi-variable typology below, taking into consideration color, writing and icons. Mugs associated with calendrically relative days, meaning a holiday associated with a particular time, but not a particular day such as birthdays, astrological signs or a specific age, were grouped in the “calendrical” category. If a particular mug posed some ambiguity as to whether or not it should be associated with a particular holiday or not, it was

discussed with colleagues. In order not to introduce further bias, a conservative view of “holiday-themed” was applied and no ambiguous mugs were introduced into the holiday subset. In addition, the Value Village assemblage “N” was kept separate from the other Dollarware assemblages, for reasons of bias. As the Value Village mugs represent mugs that have been already purchased and used, they do not directly represent consumer buying patterns at specific times of the year.

Statistical analysis was explicitly not used in this project, given the extremely small sample size and the high level of error which that entails. Instead, a more anthropological approach was taken, emphasizing sociological and anthropological explanations over charts and tables.

The typology of subsections of the “holiday” category is based on the six closest Western secular holidays which bracket February 12, the day of purchase for all assemblages save “N”, Value Village; these included Halloween, Christmas, New Year’s Eve/Day, Valentine’s Day, St. Patrick’s Day and Easter. Writing was not explicitly specified for each holiday, as there is a large number of possible combinations for each that is readily apparent to a researcher who is coming from a Westerner background. Mugs that met at least one criteria in both the color and icon categories within each particular holiday were placed in that category.

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| <p>Halloween : Oct. 31</p> <p>colors</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - orange - black <p>icons</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - <i>autumnal motifs</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - leaves - pumpkins - apples - <i>supernatural figures</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - ghosts - witches - werewolves - <i>death-related imagery</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - tombstones - skulls - skeletons - <i>candy</i> | <p>Christmas : Dec. 25</p> <p>colors</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - red - green - white <p>icons</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - <i>winter motifs</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - snow - snowmen - holly leaves - evergreen trees - reindeer - <i>familial scenes</i> - <i>Santa figures</i> - <i>imagery of gifts</i> | <p>New Year’s Eve/Day: Dec31-Jan1</p> <p>colors</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - black - white - metallics <p>icons</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - <i>champagne</i> - <i>celebration imagery</i> - <i>personification of time</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Father Time - the baby New Year |
| <p>Valentine’s Day : Feb. 14</p> <p>colors</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - red - pink - white <p>icons</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - <i>hearts</i> - <i>Cupid angels</i> - <i>gifts</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - boxes of chocolate - flowers | <p>St. Patrick’s Day : Mar. 17</p> <p>colors</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - green - white <p>icons</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - <i>four-leaf clover</i> | <p>Easter : [varies] Mar. 23, 2008</p> <p>colors</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - pink - yellow - blue - green <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - [pastels] <p>icons</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - <i>floral/pastoral scenes</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - fields - seasonal spring flowers - <i>anthropomorphic baby domesticates</i> |

| | | |
|--|--|---|
| | | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - rabbits - ducks [ducklings] - chickens [chicks] - sheep [lambs] - <i>eggs</i> |
|--|--|---|

Figure 1: Typologies for expected holidays represented in Dollarware assemblages.

Results; in which the story takes a surprising twist.

After categorizing the “holiday” mugs into the different subsets based on the above typology, the following pattern emerged.

| Halloween 3 | Christmas 9 | New Year’s 0 | Valentine’s Day 5 | St. Patrick’s 1 | Easter 8 |
|-------------------------------------|--|------------------------|--|---------------------------|---|
| I15 J01 J14 | A-16 E01 E03 E06 E12 G04* J17 L01 L02 | | D03 D16 D18 F14 J12 | F08 | D13 F02 F05 F13 L02 L04 L05 L07 |

Figure 2: “Holiday” mugs listed by accession number by particular holiday from assemblages A-M.

| Halloween 0 | Christmas 5 | New Year’s 0 | Valentine’s Day 1 | St. Patrick’s 0 | Easter 1 |
|-----------------------|---------------------------------|------------------------|-----------------------------|---------------------------|--------------------|
| | N13 N20 N23 N52 N60 | | N33 | | N36 |

Figure 3: “Holiday” mugs from the Value Village assemblage “N” listed by particular holiday.

At the beginning of this research, the proposed hypothesis predicted a spread of mugs similar to a bell-curve. If, logically speaking, stores stock their Dollarware according to consumer buying habits and assuming that purchasers will want to buy mugs for the upcoming holiday, then there should be an close to universal amount of Valentine’s Day mugs, closely followed by St. Patrick’s Day and Easter mugs, with a few mugs representing the past holidays.

In stark contrast, Christmas represents the majority of holiday mugs, followed by Easter, in both Figures 2 and 3, i.e. in all assemblages of mugs, both pre- and post- original purchase. No New Year’s themed mugs were identified in any assemblages. However, more interesting than the high numbers of Christmas and Easter mugs is the clustering seen above. Rather than a mixed group of holidays in a majority of mug assemblages ad was predicted, holiday mugs cluster by particular holidays in certain

assemblages. Five assemblages did not have any sort of holiday mug, while the other assemblages tend to have only one or two holidays represented. The chart below represents this unique clustering.

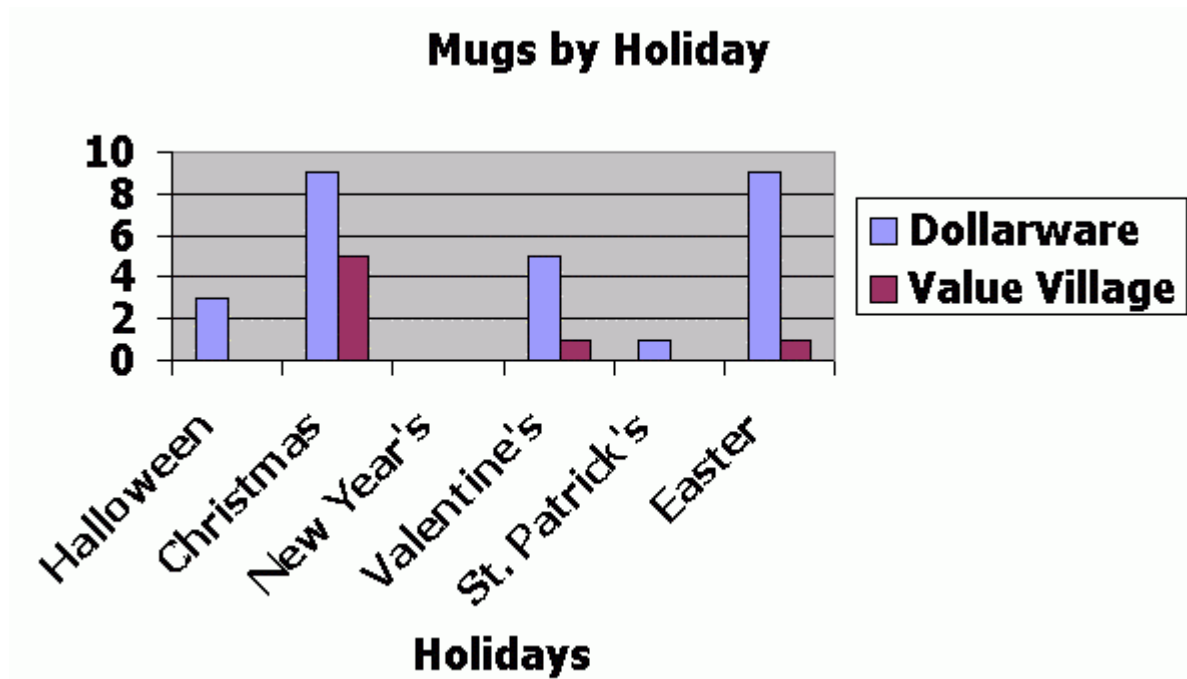


Figure 4: Comparative number of mugs by holiday and by assemblage.

Based on this patterning, it becomes possible to classify assemblages into categories of temporal awareness; namely whether an assemblage’s content looks to the past, is present-oriented or is more future-aware. Working off the visually-arranged data in Figure 5, it becomes simple to categorize assemblages. “A” and “G” are visually hidden behind “J”, as they both only have one holiday themed Christmas mug each, putting both of them squarely into past assemblages. “N” is an interesting example in that it displays the widest range of dates, with five Christmas mugs, one Valentine’s and one Easter. However, “N” reflects already purchased mugs which were later discarded, and thus does not directly depict a certain time of the year based on consumer buying habits.

| past | present | future |
|---------------------------------|----------------|---------------|
| A G J E L I N | D | F |

Figure 5: Mug assemblages categorized into temporal designations based on number of holiday themes.

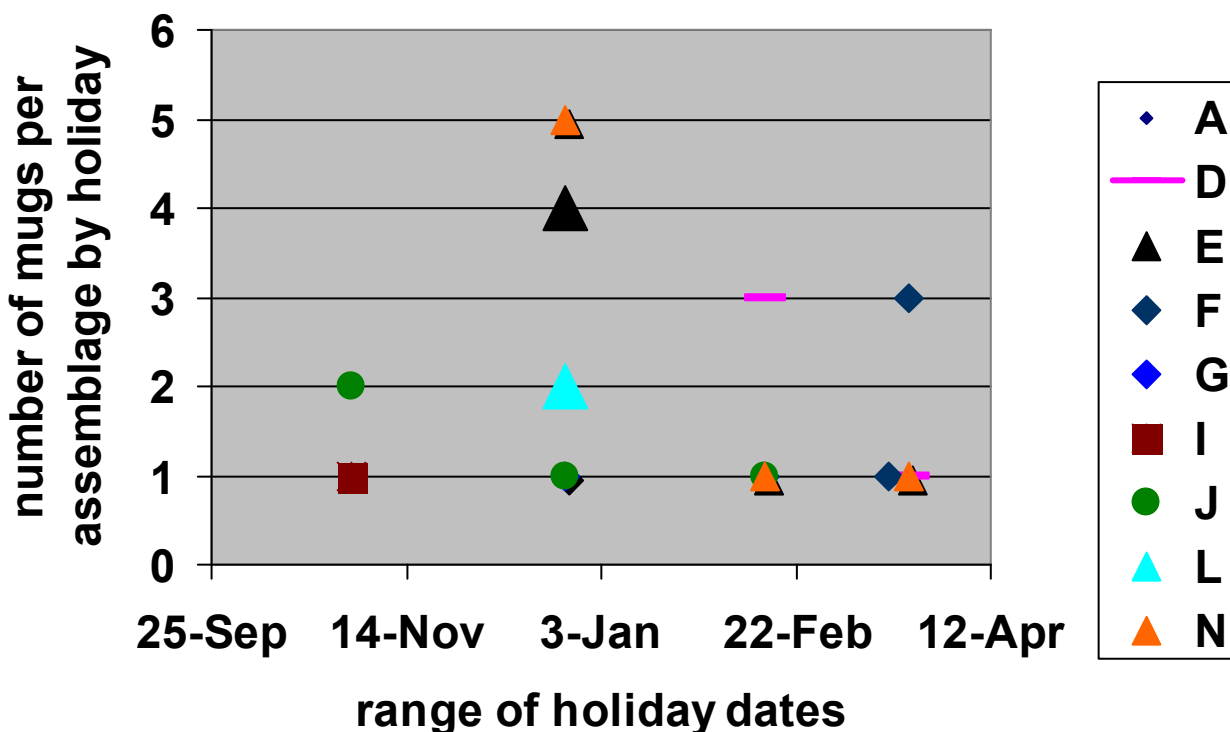


Figure 6: Number of mugs per assemblage by holiday over the range of holiday dates.

Discussion; in which further investigation is needed.

This project was interesting in that during the process of data analysis, a change of direction and a move into a different line of questioning arose based on unexpected results. Instead of seeing a bell-curve like distribution of holiday mugs at several stores, with the greatest number of them being the closest holiday [Valentine's Day, at the purchase date of 2/12/08] and tapering off in both directions, the patterning followed lines of clustering, that were generally specific to only one assemblage. In particular, holidays clustered, with no assemblage having over three different types of holiday represented.

These clusters also demonstrated the severe under-representation of several holidays from the archaeological record; in particular, the absence of New Year's themed mugs and the low number of Valentine's Day and St. Patrick's Day mugs overall. In contrast, the high numbers of Christmas and Easter mugs and the corresponding lower numbers can be explained by Western gift-giving trends associated with particular holidays.

Holidays that ranked lower in total numbers, such as St. Patrick's or New Year's, do not typically involve gift transfers. It is also notable that the St. Patrick's mug can also be interpreted as a more general "nationality" mug rather than solely a holiday-themed mug. Holidays that ranked higher, like Christmas or Easter, traditionally involve gift exchanges. Christmas, with its high emphasis on reciprocal giving, creates a strong demand for inexpensive, festive items that can be gifted to a number of recipients (Ruth, Otnes and Brunel 1989, Waldfogel 1993). Easter typically involves gift-giving to younger members of the family with the custom of the Easter basket, filled with candy and small presents. An overlay of age-intended mugs with observed holiday mugs would shed more light on the issue.

The one anomaly in this interpretation is Valentine's Day; a holiday which also involves gift-giving. However, the nature of Valentine gifts is a much more personal one, centered around romantic partners and nuclear families; Valentine gifts are not usually given even as far as the extended family. In such a

context, a piece of poorly-painted, often tacky \$1 ceramic is not likely to be deemed a socially acceptable gift nor likely to go far. In the contrasting case of Christmas, gifts are considered both appropriate and often necessary for a much wider range of acquaintances, fictive kin and widely extended family. In such a scenario, where gift-giving is often socially obligatory, the presence of cheap mugs is not surprising, as an inexpensive way to relieve oneself of reciprocal obligation (Caplow 1982, Laroche, Saad, Kim and Browne 2000). If Christmas mugs are indeed primarily being bought as gifts, perhaps they would be of higher quality than other holiday mugs.

Turning to the available literature, marketing and sales analysis has proven the complex variables present in gift-giving, namely that social pressures exert a tremendous pressure on gifting (Sherry 1983). In further support of this gift-hypothesis, the example of X-ware shows some interesting insights into mug acquisition, namely that a large number of owned mugs had been acquired through gifting, and that those gifted mugs were not necessarily liked or used. This perhaps can also go towards explaining the high levels of Christmas mugs in the Value Village assemblage, as those mugs have already been purchased and then discarded. What's more, work done by colleagues suggests that mugs have a near universal appeal for a wide range of ages and genders, making mugs an ideal gift idea for a casual gift.

Overall, assemblages which contained holiday mugs were predominantly backwards-looking assemblages, or ones that contained holidays past in relation in February 12th, the date of mug purchase, in the majority. I do not know whether this is due in part to specific store location or if it is characteristic of Dollarstores as a whole. Without knowing the particular data for sales of holiday mugs, it is impossible to say why these mugs were excavated. On one hand, they could represent the backwards nature of dollar stores in general, that these stores do not stock holiday products until after the actual holiday. From a different perspective, it is entirely possible that the stores with past-looking assemblages have in fact stocked mugs for present holidays, but have sold out of them, leaving behind the mugs that have not been sold since their holidays. More knowledge about consumer purchasing and level of customer traffic would be necessary to evaluate these scenarios. In addition, in the spirit of comparativeness, it would be very interesting to see if this same temporal awareness trend is present in different kinds of ceramics stores, namely higher-end, more expensive mugs being sold in department or home furnishing stores. Attached in an appendix is a Google Map spread of the eight sites that can be classified in a temporal designation; however, there seems to be no correlation between assemblage location and temporality.

In further research in mugs, it will be interesting to correlate research done by colleagues on gender and age-appropriateness of mugs, to see if there is any meaningful relationship between those variables and holidays, particularly Easter, where gifts are directed primarily at younger people (Hyllegard and Fox 1997). Overlapping of Christmas mugs and variables associated with physical sturdiness will also be a secondary tangent of study, in order to test a hypothesis that Christmas mugs are intended primarily for gifting as a social obligation to acquaintances. Towards a more comparative and complete methodology, it would be useful to re-excavate certain sites to determine whether they continue to carry the same temporal designation. Unfortunately, due to time and financial restraints, it was not feasible to carry out this re-evaluation in the scope of this project.

In a broader scope, this project introduces interesting implications for the element of temporality in archaeology. Most literature on this issue draws heavily from post-processualist theory and, as such, does not make sense (Thomas 1996, Ingold 1993). Identifying if an assemblage is affected by time, and further to what point of time does it look to is difficult. In the case of Dollarware vs. a pre-modern, pre-state assemblage, much of the information available to researchers would not be available, given that the information drawn upon for this project, in-depth knowledge of a particular culture's religious and secular holidays, is not easily accessible or is incomplete in much of archaeology. Without this background knowledge, bias accumulated by inaccurate conjectures and hypothesis will severely affect the end result. For archaeologies that have access to the written word or other ways of time-keeping or communication, the introduction of this self-reflexive temporality could lead to interesting conclusions about awareness of time in material culture.

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