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THE MUSEUM OF US: A BEGINNING

In my mother's house, tucked away in a drawer, lying between layers of white tissue paper, there is an aviator's cap. It is made of fawn coloured cloth, and its chin straps hang loose by its side. It is a little fragile now. The first time my grandfather wore it, he was 17. And it was 1933. In a small town in Northern Italy, Mario Messina had fulfilled a dream. He became the youngest airplane pilot in Italy. Ahead of this young man lay a long life lived across two continents, a world war, a family and countless hours of flying. But in the photograph that sits on my mantelpiece that is all yet to come. All I see is a proud aviator, standing tall beside to his aircraft, those chin straps hanging loosely around his jaw line.

What is the difference between any other aviator cap produced at the same time and Mario's aviator cap? What makes one cap qualitatively different from the others?

If I offered Mario's cap to a museum today they may accession it but they may also reject it. They might reject it because it lacks significance on a public scale and therefore it is not considered a museum-piece. After all, many of those caps were made and many are probably still in existence. No one famous wore the cap and it was not found in a critical theatre of war. Nothing distinctively unusual happened to the cap or its wearer. The life of the cap was prosaic and private.

And yet it is no ordinary aviator's cap. It is unlike the caps we wear every day to keep the harsh Australian sun out of our eyes. Caps that are fashionable but meaningless. Caps that are easily bought, easily lost and easily replaced. So I ask: what occupies that interstitial place between a museum piece and an everyday functional object? What objects reside in that space? And how?

The idea that I want to share with you is that there are accessories and apparel that live in that interstitial place in the everyday, unremarked lives of many families. And that many families house an invisible, private museum populated with items such as my grandfather's aviator cap, which are not worthy of inclusion in public museums and yet are distinctly different from the other objects which fill people's houses. They are neither insignificant stuff nor public patrimony. They are not catalogued or curated yet they are taken care of and their history is passed down through the generations – often orally. They are not housed in museums yet they are preserved and protected. They may not carry (inter)national historical significance but nor are they devoid of meaning.

It is not a new idea that humans inscribe meaning onto objects. And that objects become more or less valuable by the meanings and importance that humans afford each of them. Sometimes that meaning is given a financial value as well.

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Sometimes those objects are housed in museums open to the public so that with each visitor a little more meaning is written into the object. The birth of the museum was not, however, a public affair. The first museums were private. They were housed behind high walls in the castles and palaces of the European nobility and aristocracy as symbols of wealth and power. While in private hands, the objects within these museums had an acknowledged public value. The publically accessible art was found in churches and it served to inculcate the wealth and power of religion. The birth of the public museum came with the Louvre after the French Revolution. The museum as public institution then went about declaring which objects were valuable and which were not. The private sphere continued to co-exist with the public sphere of precious objects. Private museums were sometimes transitioned to the public sphere, such as the Wallace Collection in London.

But in between the to-and-fro of publically acknowledged artefacts, there exists a third type of museum that invisibly stands alongside these public institutions and private collections. It is also private but it is not filled with objects which are publically deemed precious. Rather it is filled with objects that the family deems precious because of an affective association between an item of clothing and a particular member of that family. These objects are inscribed with affective wealth and power. They do not just include apparel, but clothing that has been worn is especially intimate and therefore more powerful. They have the power to create connections between family members and between generations. They have the power of creating a feeling of belonging, as they allow family members to know their family history through more detailed and tangible narratives. I always knew my grandfather was a pilot; he took me flying with him when I was three. And yet, holding his cap, the cap that sat on the head of the grandfather I loved, creates something more than just the memory or the knowledge of Mario, the pilot. I touch it, I try it on. I am in the cockpit with him. The love that I feel for my grandfather coalesces in the fibres and stitches of the aviator cap. It makes me rich in connectedness. It makes me feel powerful from the security that positive family links can bring. It brings me closer not only to my grandfather but also to his daughter, my mother, as we talk about the cap and its owner. I am going to call this third type of museum – the Museum of Us.

How did my grandfather's cap survive long enough to be inscribed with enough meaning that it could become priceless to us? Acquisition is a gamble with these objects. Since these items start out as ordinary functional things, it is difficult to identify them as potentially capable of carrying affective wealth and power. So the first issue is one of survival. Did Mario know, at the time of wearing it, that this would be not just another ordinary cap? That it was a precious item that belonged in the Museum of Us? I dare say not. These precious objects start out as ordinary objects. It is only through time, revisitation and conservation that they become meaningful. I think of so many scarves, stockings, caps, dresses, handbags, nightgowns, ties and shirts that never had the opportunity to enter the Museum of Us simply because they were discarded or lost too early to have acquired meaning. Especially in a family that has spanned four continents in four generations.

In order to be accessioned into the Museum of Us, it is incumbent on family members to become guardians and curators of these pieces. In my family at least, there is never a meeting or a conversation about which items belong in the Museum of Us and who is to be their guardian for each generation. There is no acquisitions committee that meets regularly. There is no formal cataloguing of each item. No updates are sent around the family about the location and state of each object. No exhibitions are held. There is only the odd Sunday afternoon conversation about the cap, or a story about Mario's war-time adventures, a flick through an old family album or a silent pause by the mantel piece to notice something new in the photograph of the man and his plane. Weeks and months and years can go by without family members viewing or discussing the piece. The meaning-making and hence the importance of the object grows slowly and organically, through causal revisitations by different members of the family. Time plays a crucial factor. As the object is passed from one generation to the next, there is a moment in which the item acquires meaning. This object has become precious enough to be cared for by people other than Mario. Time also plays a role. As Mario passes away, his objects acquire greater importance. And with every year that the family moves away from being able to see and touch and love and live with Mario, his objects become more important in telling the story of who he was. Belonging and connectedness do not only happen with family members who are living. Through the aviator's cap I can more easily maintain my connectedness to a man who was a wonderful grandfather, even though he passed way in the early 1990s.



Figure 2. Mario Messina wearing his aviator cap and uniform, Italy, 1934.

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The aviator's cap is not the only item in our Museum of Us. There is a dress that my mother made and wore for her 21st birthday. A white satin, cross-over, mini emblazoned with large colourful semi-precious stones. It was 1968 after all. A fine pair of stockings from my great-grandmother that lies unused in the original packaging. A bespoke, black, woollen A-line dress that my aunt had commissioned in Rome in the 1960s, which somehow came to me, and which I still wear each winter. A scarf of my grandmother's that my sister possesses. And the blue checked dress that my grandmother bought the day I was born in 1972, which I put on my daughter the day she turned one. These objects lie scattered through the wardrobes and chests of my family members. They have no display cabinet; they have had no opening night festivities. But maybe they should. Because these items are unique, not in the same way that there has ever only been one Mona Lisa but in the uniqueness they have acquired from the stories written along each thread and stitch. These are the narratives that help sew families together. Perhaps the next iteration for my family is to come together and purposefully accession, curate, catalogue and display the precious, unique objects in the Museum of Us. And invite the rest of the family to an opening night party.