

Thinking Through Heirlooms (Brighton, 6 Nov 26)

University of Brighton, Nov 06, 2026

Deadline: Jul 3, 2026

Pragya Sharma

An Interdisciplinary Symposium.

Keynote Speaker:

Prof Soumhya Venkatesan with Lydia Donahue (University of Manchester).

The word 'heirloom' evokes objects tucked away in wardrobes, imbued with woody, musty fragrance, aged with patina and eerie silence – rescued, retained, preserved, and remembered. Their fate remains unpredictable: second-hand stores, antique shops, auction houses, museum collections. Heirlooms chart different trajectories with different owners, soaked in different personalities, carrying a panoply of histories imposed by each owner. As objects moving between generations, heirlooms accrue, embody, and elicit multiple meanings, holding both personal and cultural relevance and developing their own life histories. Around this central object, scholars have explored postmemory, kinship, hidden heirlooms, space and homes, memorial samples, family archives, home cultures and migration, and industrial heritage. Not restricted to physical objects alone – what about the intangible? What if the heirloom no longer exists, resulting in 'oral heirlooms' (Ajit, 2015) or the passing of skill as inheritance?

This symposium unravels such complexities by examining alternative ways of listening and reading heirlooms, deconstructing established ideas of what an heirloom is, and unlocking new knowledge embedded within them. The symposium follows three themes:

1. Person-Object Relationships: Laden with emotional weight, heirlooms share tenuous relationships with owner identity, invoking unique 'person-object' relationships (McCracken, 1988), suggesting multiple ways relations are articulated through things. Lying at the intersection of objects, people, and relationships, heirlooms reinforce the central role artefacts play in understanding culture and society, with materials and materiality serving as conduits for these relationships. One may also examine the making process of an heirloom, its crafting and craftsmanship, with materials ranging from metal, ceramic, wood, textiles, paper, and plastic, taking forms including pottery, decorative arts, needlework, clothing, photographs, furniture and furnishings, ornaments, musical instruments, recipes, letters, and diaries.

2. Transference and Transactions: While heirlooms and intergenerationality are often intertwined, non-linear passing is not uncommon. Bequeathing may not always be from older to younger; heirlooms are sometimes passed before death, making one an 'unprepared custodian' (Dimmock, 2025). This theme subverts dominant ways of receiving heirlooms and the spaces they occupy, including archives and museum collections. Heirlooms do not always follow patrilineal lineage;

thus, questions of hierarchy, value, and significance emerge. Further, not all heirlooms are held with importance; they are forgotten or misremembered. Such heirlooms matter too, inextricably connected to ways of remembering: material memory, cultural memory, and sensory memory.

3. The New Heirlooms: Can heirlooms be chosen? What happens when one is left without ancestors, resulting in non-consanguineous heirlooms? What if heirlooms are intentional, specifically created? In crafting new heirlooms, what role can designers play in creating timeless, durable objects for longevity, encouraging custodianship through embedding memory? With rising eco-consciousness, what all do digital heirlooms entail (Giaccardi et al., 2012)? This theme engages with tensions and contradictions in the digital humanities, sustainability studies, and technology heirlooms – electronic artefacts, online memorialization and social media. How can we speculate imaginative futures around care and heirlooms, including exploring heirlooms as educational tools to foster better relationships?

We encourage submissions from design history, textile studies, design anthropology, sociology, cultural studies, museum studies, design research, archive studies, oral history, feminist studies, material culture, and beyond. We welcome encounters with heirlooms: theoretical and object-based studies, personal reflections and artistic explorations across media. We especially encourage submissions from affiliated and unaffiliated scholars, including graduate students, early career researchers, artists, independent researchers, designers, and practitioners.

Please send your proposals for a 15-minute presentation or a 5–10-minute video or performance as a 300–400-word abstract, by submitting the form below, before 3rd July 2026. We will respond to all the submissions with a decision by the end of July. We aim to publish the knowledge and discussions that emerge from this symposium as a volume by a renowned publisher, subject to confirmation. If you have any questions or wish to discuss the submission in alternative formats, please do not hesitate to write to either of us.

Submission Link:

https://forms.office.com/pages/responsepage.aspx?id=kLsAqf6UWEaLNN1yCExQZPHkFx3ds0ZFqNugVS_L9TFUNExLT0FUUKFYNFdHWFVCTkFCQjE0Ulc5SS4u&route=shorturl

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References

- Ajit, A. (2015). Oral Heirlooms: The Vocalisation of Loss and Objects. *Oral History*, 70–78.
- Dimmock, K. (2025). What Do I Do with all This Stuff? Inheritance and the Unprepared Custodian: Relating Meaning Through the Mediated Artistic Collection (Doctoral dissertation, Open Research Newcastle).
- Giaccardi, E., Churchill, E., & Liu, S. (2012). Heritage Matters: Designing for Current and Future Values Through Digital and Social Technologies. In *CHI'12 Extended Abstracts on Human Factors in Computing Systems*, 2783–2786.
- McCracken, G. (1990). *Culture and Consumption*. Indian University Press.

ArtHist.net

Reference:

CFP: Thinking Through Heirlooms (Brighton, 6 Nov 26). In: ArtHist.net, Jun 1, 2026 (accessed Jun 1, 2026), <<https://arthist.net/archive/52578>>.