

# Losing the art and craft of know-how: Capturing vanishing embodied knowledge in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

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A central role of the information professions and collecting institutions is to preserve knowledge for future generations. This function can be dated to at least the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BCE and the foundation of the Great Library of Alexandria. Yet despite the massive changes in succeeding millennia, moving from papyrus, to print and digital media, the information professions and institutions continue to focus on encoded information, what Buckland (1991) defines as 'Information as Thing'. Information research also demonstrates a similarly narrow focus with analysis of the research literature (Wilson, 2000; Julien et. al, 2011) demonstrating an almost exclusive focus on studies of purposive information seeking and searching within the encoded knowledge medium. As a consequence, a range of other forms of information or ways of knowing are significantly underrepresented in our institutional collections and in information research. These include information relating to embodied and cultural practices and skills of craft and trades people, which historically have been passed down via master-apprentice relationships (Lave & Wenger, 1991).

This omission has important consequences both for our knowledge of the past and for society today. Our knowledge of our ancestor's lives has largely had to be pieced together from scant archaeological remains. This has led to the rise of experimental archaeology, attempting to reconstruct the skills of the past (Mathieu, 2002), as an important area of research. Historical re-enactors, motivated by a strong desire to be 'authentic' in their period practices and dress (Robinson & Yerbury, 2015) have also played an important role in this quest to rediscover lost embodied knowledge.

The loss of embodied knowledge is not only a concern for historians. In the midst of our 'information society', the global shift from a production to a post-production economy has led to a rapidly shrinking pool of individuals who possess needed embodied craft knowledge.

An example of this is classic car restoration. This is now a multi-billion dollar global industry, with the most desirable classic cars now worth millions. Despite this, the classic car community itself recognises a growing crisis as the number of craftspeople with needed skills, from hand-forming bodywork to interior trimming diminishes. Even manufacturers themselves, including Ferrari, Aston Martin and Jaguar, have had to call former employees out of retirement to assist with the establishment of their own restoration services.. Many of these skills are being preserved, and in some cases re-invented, by amateur enthusiasts.

The present paper draws on the findings of an ethnographic study of enthusiast car restorers to explore how they are acquiring, preserving and passing on embodied information practices (Lloyd,

2010). The researchers' aim is to make this the first of a range of case studies of lost and vanishing information practices. Two broad questions drive this study:

1. What is the role of the information professions, institutions and research in preserving vanishing embodied information practices?
2. How do embodied information practices travel?

Evidence will contribute to the emerging discourse in information research about embodied knowledge and ways of knowing in an increasing digital world.

## References

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