

Thrift

In Search of the Art of Living Well



Thrift: In Search of the Art of Living Well

This exhibit is an attempt to explore the history of thrift in the United States through material culture. Rather than begin with a narrative and try to illustrate that history through objects, we believe that artifacts have a way of telling a story themselves.



The process by which we gathered items was far from scientific—we began by searching eBay and online auction sites, and by scouring consignment shops and garage sales for items that invoke the term “thrift.” Few of the items exhibited here are valuable antiques; they are more likely to have been purchased for \$3.99 on eBay than at Christie’s or Sotheby’s.

As we gathered hundreds of artifacts, we began to see themes in the types of cultural products, the communities, and the time periods wherein “thrift” has been invoked. We noted, among other things, the frequency with which the term was used as an appeal toward women as a means of thinking about domestic life, the importance of thrift in mobilizing citizens during times of national crisis, how thrift educators reached out to children, and the importance of thrift to conservationists and environmentalists.

We have come to respect the complexity and value of thrift, and hope that you will leave, if not a thrift advocate yourself, with a sense that though much of this exhibit is historical, there are important connections to be made with many of the most pressing concerns of today.

Visit www.NewThrift.org

What is Thrift?

It is difficult to define the word thrift, because it has always been a contested idea. Advocates of thrift praise the term as a virtue; its opponents condemn it as a vice of selfishness.

Put most simply, thrift is the moral discipline of wisest use. It suggests a set of principles and ethical guidelines intended to orient us toward the best use of our resources. Thrift concerns not only the material world—the world of material goods and the money to buy them—but also the natural, spiritual, and aesthetic worlds.

For A New Thrift

“Thrift: In Search of the Art of Living Well” is a companion exhibit to the report *For A New Thrift: Confronting the Debt Culture*.

For A New Thrift confronts the linked problems of high rates of personal and societal debt, low savings, and growing inequality, and proposes initiatives for a new thrift culture that can provide competitive alternatives to the current debt culture. We use the word “thrift” to describe our mission and goals because it suggests more than just savings: it encompasses the values and practices of self sufficiency, stewardship, and sustainability. A new thrift culture is one in which authoritative public and private institutions foster these values and practices.



“Thrift: In Search of the Art of Living Well” was designed as a traveling exhibit. If you are interested in bringing the exhibit to your organization, or know of someone who may be, please contact us at: thrift@americanvalues.org.

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