

The Dollarware Cultural Tradition: **An examination of the connection between ideography, low-quality drinking vessels,** **and the globalization of consumption and production**

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Abstract: The meaning behind visual culture is something that archaeology has always struggled to comprehend, largely because most imagery is only really understood by those who make and use it. Dollarware allows us to study artifacts in a way that archaeologists normally cannot. An ideographic analysis of 228 mugs purchased at Dollar Stores across Montreal reveals that certain patterns guide the visual expression present on Dollarware ceramics. Although more research is necessary, I hypothesize that these patterns are governed by a recognition by the producers of Dollarware that certain images and combinations sell in North America better than others.

Introduction

Ideographic analysis has been a crucial part of the study of archaeological remains since before archaeology was even recognized as a separate discipline from art history. The purposes it has served, however, have changed a great deal. Early ideographic analysis was focused primarily on attributing classical works of art to various time periods, schools, or even specific artists (Trigger, 2006). As archaeologists began to turn their attention to non-classical materials, the idea that an examination of the formal and stylistic aspects of a material assemblage could provide chronological or cultural information led to in two theoretical directions. One was that ideographic components allowed archaeologists to identify the “culture” that produced a site or artifact, as well as the relative time period in which it was formed. The second was that imagery allowed archaeologists to recreate aspects of past cultures such as religion, ideology, and cognitive ability. Both of these assumptions have come under serious criticism in the last century: Christopher Hawkes rightly pointed out the difficulty archaeologists have in making inferences about any ideational features of prehistoric life, while researchers such as Lewis Binford have noted that site formation is much more than a direct reflection of the ethnicity of its makers.

While it would be wrong to state that modern archaeology has entirely taken the ideas of Hawkes to heart (Thackeray, 2005), most ideographic analyses today do little more than speculate on ideological intent. Archaeologists will only hypothesize on the relationship between visual culture and the mindsets of its makers when multiple lines of evidence beyond the imagery itself are available. It has been widely recognized that, short of exhuming and reincarnating the makers of prehistoric images themselves, we may never know what they were truly meant for. For this reason, the Dollarware Project provides us with a chance to approach the meaning behind material culture from another direction. Can a detailed ideographic analysis of an assemblage of modern-day ceramics tell us anything about the relationship between visual culture and contemporary society?

Dollarware, Drinking Mugs, and Globalization

More than ever before, the production and consumption of goods are dissociated processes. Globalization, itself centuries in the making, has made it so that a product can be assembled on one continent and shipped to consumers on another continent efficiently and cheaply. In many cases,

importing goods from other distant countries has actually become a better economic strategy than making those goods locally. The reasons behind this are far more complicated than can be explained here, but very simply, North America has developed a trade relationship with a number of industrializing nations (China, in particular) that provides these developing countries with a source of capital in exchange for a wide variety of cheap consumer imports. As a result, the United States and Canada manufacture very little, but consume a lot.

Dollarware is a perfect example of this phenomenon, and as a material representation of a historically unique economic system it is therefore an interesting subject to study archaeologically. It isn't a widely discussed topic, but a significant portion of North American material culture is produced by people who are *not Western*. This is a remarkable arrangement, and one that has most certainly had an effect on visual culture, particularly in areas that North American consumers consciously recognize the least. Imagery of this type may reflect facets of Western culture, but it may also reflect *perceptions* of North American society; in particular, perceptions about what images will or won't sell in Western markets. With this in mind, the ideographic elements of Dollarware, an assemblage of low-quality mugs produced exclusively in China and sold to North American markets, deserve a closer look. Can we learn anything from them about how we as a culture are perceived and understood by other parts of the world?

Methods

For this study, and the rest of the Dollarware projects, 228 ceramic mugs were acquired at a variety of different discount stores (Dollarama, Luxe du Dollar, etc.) across Montreal, as well as 61 mugs purchased at a thrift store, Value Village. Every discount store mug (except two) with a known country of origin was made somewhere in China, while the Value Village mugs come from a number of different countries, including a few mugs from Canada which appear to be homemade.

A presence/absence list was created to identify the individual elements present in the assemblage. This list contained 16 categories (No Icon, Single Word, Phrase, Human, Cat, Dog, Other Animals, Toys, Holiday, Calendrical, Nationality, Occupational, Food, Floral, Geometric, and Copyright), and each mug was examined for the presence or absence of images that fell into these categories. The individuals who completed these trait lists all self-identify as members of Western culture, speak English fluently, and go to university in North America. The presence/absence list allowed examiners to record multiple traits found on one mug, but could not account for the presence of multiple images that fell into the same categories (two dogs on one mug, for example). For the purpose of this study, some categories, such as "Copyright" and "Calendrical", were later excluded due to low frequency within the assemblage, while others, like "Dog", "Cat", and "Other Animal", were combined into one category (in this case, "Animals").

Once this list was complete for the entirety of the 289 mugs, a second presence/absence list was made to examine colours present on each mug. Like the image list, examiners looked for and recorded the presence or absence of 10 categories: Offwhite/Beige, Black, Brown, Red, Orange, Yellow, Green, Blue, Purple, and Pink.

In this study, the Value Village mugs were treated as a comparative assemblage to the rest of the Dollarware mugs. This was done for two reasons. One, it removes mugs with uncertain or diverse origins from the analysis. Value Village purchases and resells previously owned ceramics; these include homemade mugs, vessels that were originally part of larger dining sets or collections, or items that held original market value that was significantly higher than discount store mugs (known from here on in as Dollarware). The only real trait that unites all the Value Village artifacts is that they are all ceramics that were no longer wanted by their original owners, and that they had not (at the time of our purchase) been purchased by anyone else. Simply put, the context of production and market forces behind the Value Village assemblage were not as straightforward and uniform as the Dollarware collection, and so provided no direct assistance in answering this study's central question.

Secondly, a comparative collection containing a much larger diversity of origins and styles of mugs made it possible to define the "Dollarware Cultural Tradition" in relation to something else. In this sense, the Value Village mugs were seen to be a representative sample of the totality of North American ceramic drinking vessels, while Dollarware was a subset of this category, defined by certain constraints

(the most basic of these constraints being that they were all created in one country and purchased in one consistent setting). Of course, even the Value Village collection was assembled under a set of constraints (it is composed entirely of unwanted mugs, for example), and in that sense is by no means an accurate depiction of North American ceramic culture in general. However, it contains a broader variety of styles, imagery, written components and origins than Dollarware, and can therefore help illuminate certain general properties about Dollarware imagery that are useful to this study. This comparative data was then combined with the presence/absence lists available for each mug for quantitative and statistical analysis.

Results

Comparative Data:

The comparative results compiled from the presence/absence data show some differences between what one would expect to find in a Dollarware assemblage more (or less) and what one would see elsewhere. Figure 1 shows the differences in the frequency of various visual elements between the two collections. The most noticeable deviations are 1) the 15% increase in geometric elements (shapes, lines, other images that, in the eyes of the examiner, are abstract and do not represent anything more concrete) in the Dollarware assemblage, 2) the larger presence of single words in Dollarware vs. the larger presence of phrases in Value Village (see Figure 2), 3) the 11% difference between floral (flowers, leaves, non-edible plants) frequencies, and 4) the 9% increase in animal frequency in the Value Village collection. It should be noted that the most common traits, writing (single words and phrases), floral, and geometrics, appear on 40.4%, 28.1%, and 31% of all Dollarware mugs, respectively. Value Village, by contrast, has a similar frequency of writing, but a much higher presence of animals and floral designs. Both have a “No Icon” frequency of about 14.5%.

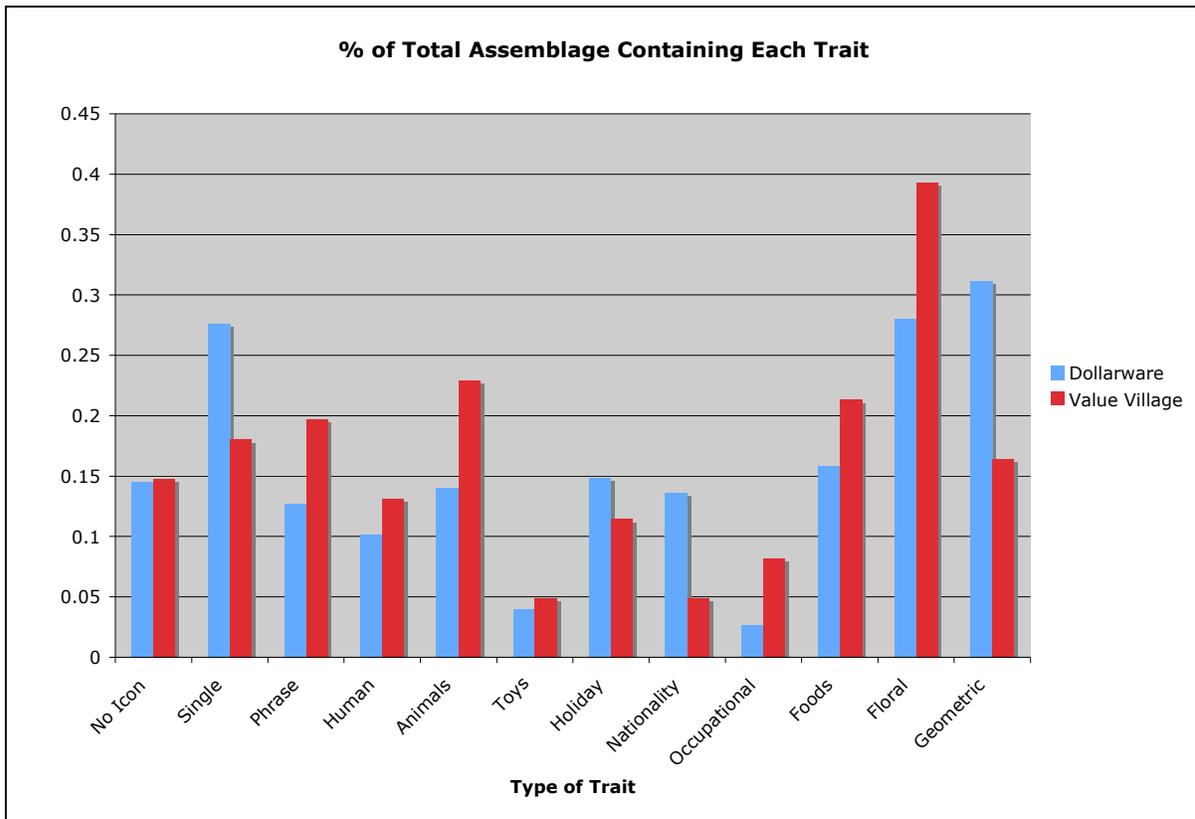


Figure 1: A comparison of the frequency of traits present in the Dollarware (Blue) and Value Village (Red) assemblages.

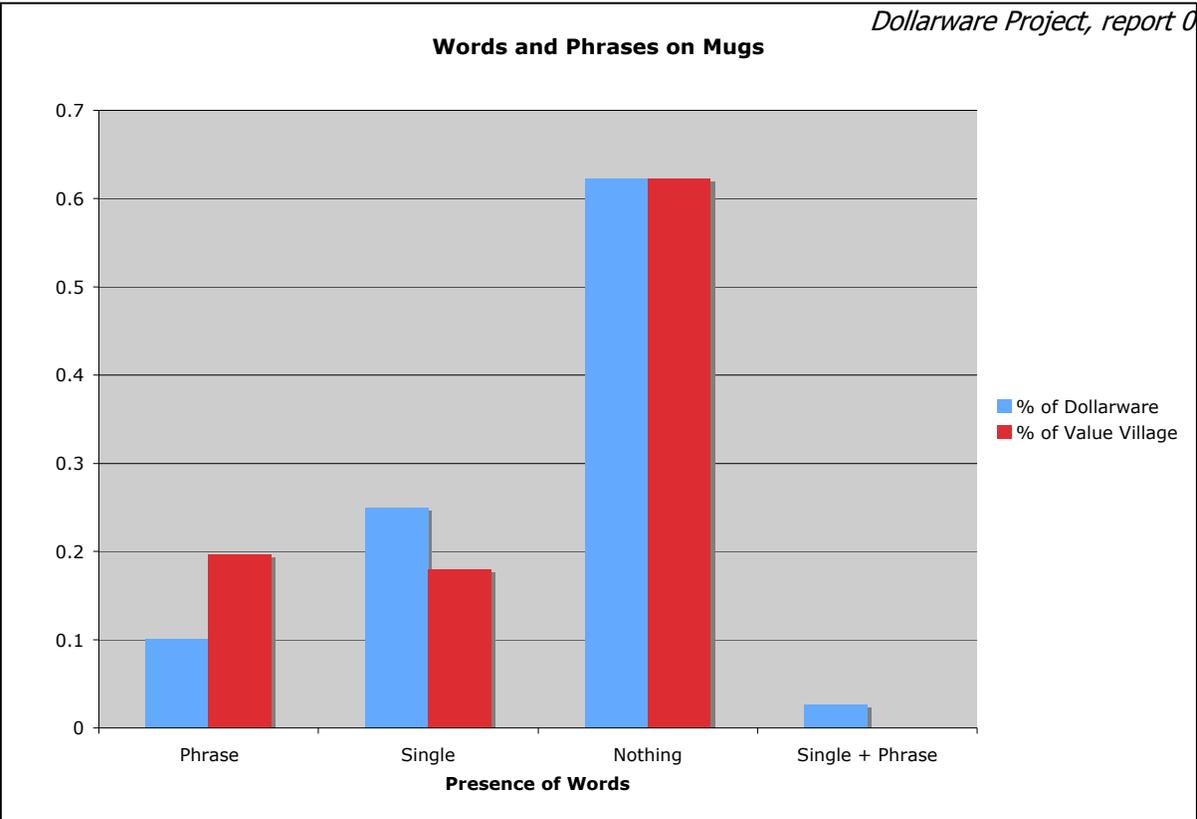


Figure 2: A comparison of the frequency of writing in each assemblage. While they deviate in what kind of writing significantly, they have approximately the same amount overall.

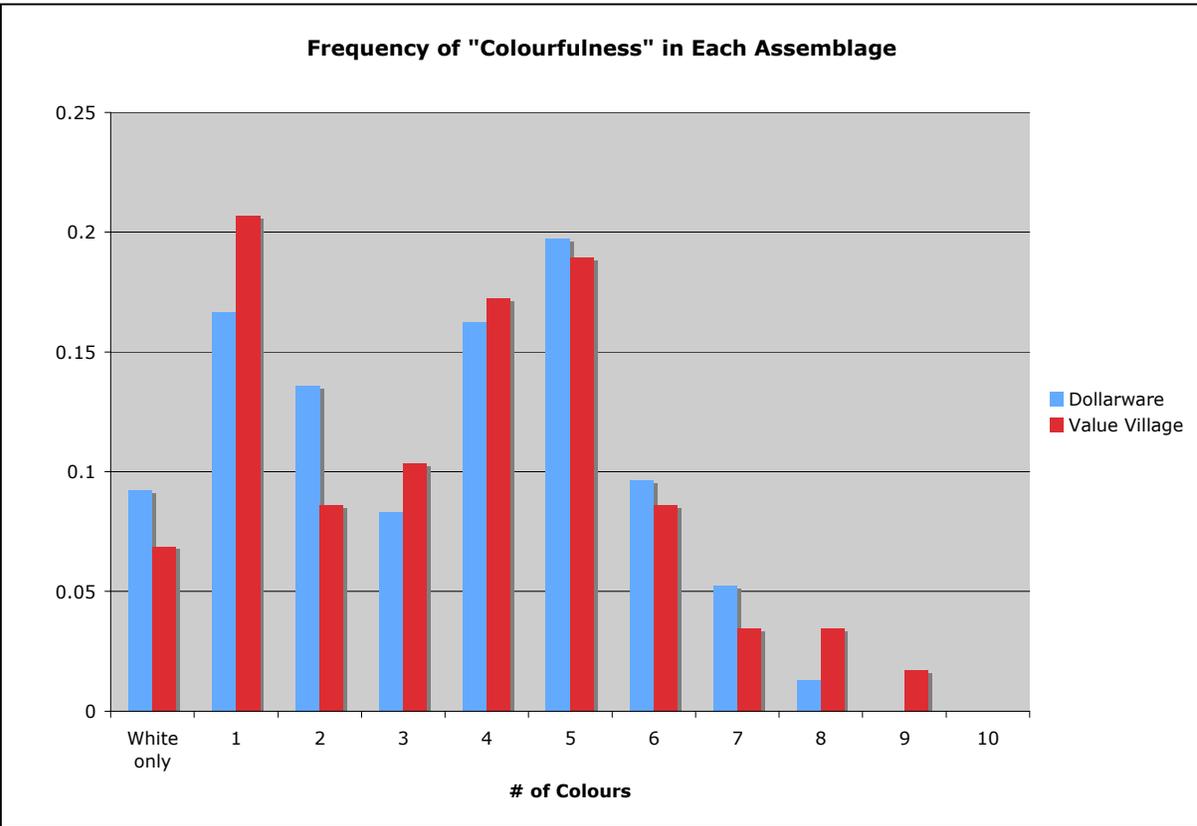


Figure 3: A comparison of the frequency of "colourfulness", or the number of colours present on each mug. Like Figure 4, there is little deviation here between the two collections, which fall into a bimodal distribution.

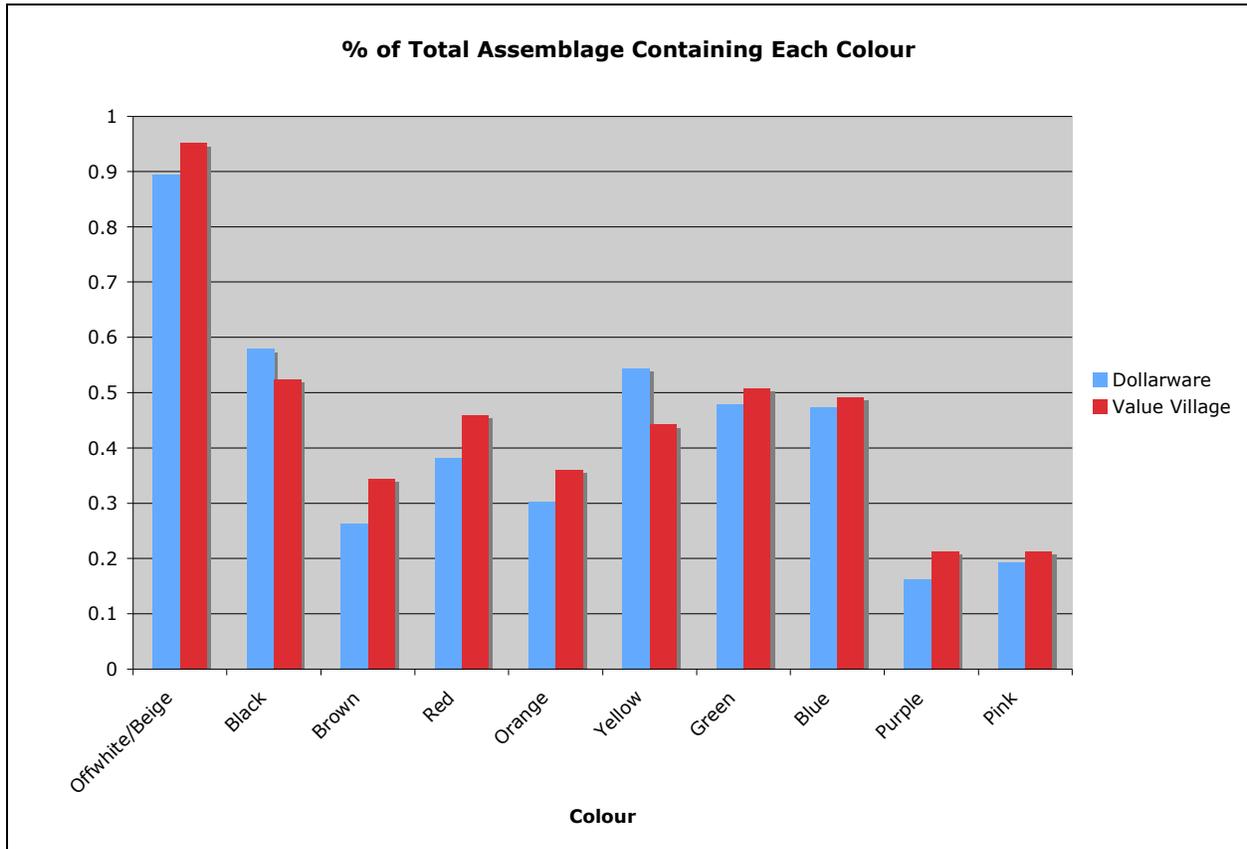


Figure 4: A comparison of the frequency of colours in each assemblage. These figures show much less deviation than the ideographic elements, although they show an overall high frequency for most colours.

As for colour, the comparative distributions show little in the way of deviation between the two assemblages. Overall, they are quite similar: the average frequency of any colour, subtracting off-white/beige (these are present on virtually every mug as a base), is 33.8% for Dollarware and 35.6% for Value Village, and there’s a bimodal distribution present in the “colourfulness” (number of colours present on a mug) of each assemblage, peaking at 2 and 4-5 colours per mug. Unlike the ideographic comparison, there are no large differences between the two collections, and it seems that a fair amount of colour is present throughout.

Chi-Square Tests:

Chi-Square tests were used to test for relevant connections between various ideographic elements within the Dollarware collection. These relationships were tested statistically after they were identified visually: if an examiner noted a series of mugs with similar combinations of elements, a chi-square was employed to see if this connection was statistically relevant (relevance relates to how likely it is that a certain frequency of numbers could form randomly – a p of 0.05 or lower means that there is at

least a 95% chance that the numbers are the product of non-random forces). First, the presence of certain categories of imagery were tested against the presence of words:

	No Words	Words	
No Food	129	63	$X^2 = 12$
Food	13	23	$P = 4.15E-4$

	No Words	Words	
No Floral	88	76	$X^2 = 18.489$
Floral	54	10	$P = 1.71E-5$

	No Words	Words	
No Holiday	125	74	$X^2 = 0.1895$
Holiday	17	12	$p = 0.663$

	No Words	Words	
No Humans	133	72	$X^2 = 5.83$
Humans	9	14	$p = 0.0157$

The correlation between various image categories was then tested:

	No Floral	Floral	
No Geometric	113	44	$X^2 = 0.0005$
Geometric	51	20	$p = 0.9821$

	No Floral	Floral	
No Nationality	140	57	$X^2 = 0.1268$
Nationality	23	8	$p = 0.7199$

Elements of colour were then tested against ideographic components:

	Red and White	More Colour	
No Nationality	40	158	$X^2 = 1.8095$
Nationality	3	28	$p = 0.1785$

Note: this test was designed to see whether there was a correlation between "colourfulness" and the Canadian flag, which appears on a number of mugs in a non-traditional, more-than-red-and-white format. Despite the lack of correlation, these frequencies show that the overwhelming majority of vessels with nationality on them did in fact add a lot more colour.

	2 or Less Colours	4 or More	
No Food	83	108	$X = 7.2983$
Food	7	29	$P = 0.0069$

Finally, a possible "busyness" vs. "colourfulness" relationship (if more colour relates to more distinct visual elements) was tested:

	Sum of Traits 1-2	3 or More	
Sum of Colours 1-2	44	10	$X = 4.6113$
Sum of Colours 3-More	90	47	$p = 0.0318$

Discussion:

To infer, even at a basic level, about the intent that lurks behind the ideographic aspects of Dollarware, two statements had to be tested: one, that Dollarware, as a constrained expression of stylistic ceramic variability, has some visual properties that distinguish it from other, more diverse assortments of North American ceramics, and two, that within the Dollarware “cultural tradition”, there are certain patterns or relationships between visual components that can be identified. More simply, Dollarware has to be a distinct phenomenon of its own that seems to follow some very basic rules and patterns. If these rules hold up, then there is likely to be a cause for them. Arguably, they could be reflections of a selective pressure, limiting what kinds of visual elements appear and what combinations. It must be proven first, however, that Dollarware even has its own set of rules.

The comparative analysis of Dollarware and the Value Village collection was designed to assess the first statement, and it did in fact uncover a few notable differences in image frequency. The question remains, however, as to how useful this comparison is if Value Village is not an accurate sample of all types of ceramics available to Western consumers. As mentioned before, Value Village represents a class of North American drinking vessel that has been *sold*, and is therefore no longer wanted. We know very little about the commercial and productive origins of these items, only that they were owned and then given up. Figure 1 might be telling us, then, that Value Village has a high frequency of floral mugs because Montreal residents find floral patterns and images to be ugly or tacky, rather than pointing out that Dollarware makers under-represent flowers compared to everyone else. With the current available evidence, these conclusions are equifinal, and so do little for Dollarware as a distinct cultural tradition.

The Chi-Square tests were added to the study to evaluate the second statement, that Dollarware contains a set of internal rules that affect visual expression. This section of the study came back with much stronger results than the comparative analysis, showing correlations between a number of variables. The presence of writing in particular seems to be linked closely to the visual elements on a mug: when food or humans are represented on the vessel, words tend to accompany them, while the opposite is true for floral designs. Lots of colour is always in high frequency, even in images, like the Canadian flag, that are normally far less vibrant.



Figure 5: An example of a hyper-coloured Canadian flag mug. (<http://dollarware.org/a-03.jpg>)

While there were a number of methodological problems in distinguishing features of Dollarware in comparison to Value Village, it was much easier to identify some patterns within the Dollarware

collection itself. However, even the strong statistical relationships that underlie these patterns are undermined by the lack of a reliable comparative sample. Without a larger “representative” sample to test, any patterns found within Dollarware cannot be said to be exclusive to it, and could just as easily exist elsewhere. The Value Village collection was again insufficient for this, as it was too small to consistently produce good Chi-Square results to compare to Dollarware.

Combined with the inherently subjective nature of image and colour categorization and identification that undoubtedly led to discrepancies in examiner classifications, it may seem as if this study contains too many fatal methodological flaws to conclude much of anything. In a normal archaeological situation, where researchers have no direct access to the cultures and peoples they are studying, this would be the case. However, the Dollarware project is different, as we are studying material aspects of the culture we currently live in. We are, in a sense, privileged interpreters of visual culture in ways archaeologists studying the past never can be, and have insights that would take an archaeologist years to accumulate. Revealingly, many of the patterns identified in this study are essentially statements of the obvious to a North American observer: while I was certainly delighted to find a negative correlation between floral designs and written elements, most of my colleagues wondered why I needed statistics to figure that out. So while a lot of methodological improvement is necessary if further insights are to be made into Dollarware, the basic visual patterns identified in this study offer me a chance to at least theorize, as a Westerner, as to why the mugs look the way they do.

Every vessel in the Dollarware cultural tradition shares, on a non-stylistic level, two features: one, it comes from somewhere in China, and two, it was sold for approximately a dollar in North America. They are all artifacts of the globalization process, and how it has transformed the material culture around us. They are all, as every Dollarware researcher has said at least once, “ugly”, or at the very least, “tacky”. Stylistically, the entire Dollarware tradition can be defined by the kinds of images we find upon it: unreasonably colourful Canadian flags and maple leaves, images of food with their names written next to them, flowers, animals, and so on. Dollarware iconography is composed of simple images: they are typically bright and colourful, tend to contain more single words than phrases, and typically highlight one or two specific aspects of Western culture. Despite the fact that they are made in China, any mug containing national or holiday-based imagery is decidedly North American. There are no Chinese New Year mugs, and only one vessel contained any Chinese writing whatsoever (amidst Good Morning in a number of languages).

It is likely that market forces are the most important shaping factor in determining the visual elements of Dollarware. Certain patterns within the collection suggest an understanding of how North Americans buy mugs (others, like the hyper-coloured Canadian flags, still don’t make much sense), and therefore, how to sell them. The floral design/words pattern is the best example of this. Flowers are typically a popular domestic decoration in North America, and floral designs have always been considered somewhat tasteful and refined. Writing on mugs, however, is not. Dollarware producers, then, have maintained a fairly consistent barrier between the presence of a floral design and writing, recognizing this distinction. Floral decorations on mugs are attempts to appeal to North American consumers to purchase a fancier, more mature drinking vessel, despite the fact that it is being sold for a dollar and is a low-quality mug all-around. The negative correlation between floral designs and words is a deliberate pattern in Dollarware production, and reflects an appeal to a consumer’s sense of taste by the producers. Without further research into the production and distribution of imported mugs (where they come from, who specifically designs the images, how they are selected to be sold), this may be the most that can be said at this time on the intent behind the imagery of the Dollarware cultural tradition. However, we have been able to say something, which is a step in the right direction.

References:

- Thackeray, J. Francis. 2005. The wounded roan: a contribution to the relation of hunting and trance in southern African rock art. *Antiquity* 79:5-18.
- Trigger, Bruce. 2006. *A History of Archaeological Thought, 2nd ed.* New York: Cambridge University Press.

Appendix:

Data for Colour frequencies (Figure 4)

	Offwhite/ Beige	Black	Brown	Red	Orange	Yellow	Green	Blue	Purple	Pink
Sum	261.00	164.00	81.00	115.00	91.00	151.00	140.00	138.00	50.00	57.00
% of Total	0.90	0.57	0.28	0.40	0.31	0.52	0.48	0.48	0.17	0.20
Dollarware	204.00	132.00	60.00	87.00	69.00	124.00	109.00	108.00	37.00	44.00
% of Total	0.89	0.58	0.26	0.38	0.30	0.54	0.48	0.47	0.16	0.19
Value Village	58.00	32.00	21.00	28.00	22.00	27.00	31.00	30.00	13.00	13.00
% of Total	0.95	0.52	0.34	0.46	0.36	0.44	0.51	0.49	0.21	0.21

Data for Colourfulness (Figure 3)

# of Colours	# of Mugs	# of Mugs (without Value Village)	# of Value Village Mugs	% of Dollarama	% of Value Village
White only	25		21	0.092105263	0.068965517
1	50		38	0.166666667	0.206896552
2	36		31	0.135964912	0.086206897
3	25		19	0.083333333	0.103448276
4	47		37	0.162280702	0.172413793
5	56		45	0.197368421	0.189655172
6	27		22	0.096491228	0.086206897
7	14		12	0.052631579	0.034482759
8	5		3	0.013157895	0.034482759
9	1		0	0	0.017241379
10	0		0	0	0
Total	289		228	1	1

Data for image traits (Figure 1)

	No Icon	Single	Phrase	Human	Animals	Toys
Dollarware (228)	33	63	29	23	32	9
Value Village (61)	9	11	12	8	14	3
Dollarware %	0.14	0.28	0.13	0.10	0.14	0.04
Value Village %	0.15	0.18	0.20	0.13	0.23	0.05

	Holiday	Nationality	Occupational	Foods	Floral	Geometric
Dollarware (228)	34	31	6	36	64	71
Value Village (61)	7	3	5	13	24	10
Dollarware %	0.15	0.14	0.03	0.16	0.28	0.31
V. Village %	0.11	0.05	0.08	0.21	0.39	0.16