The walls of my room are covered with an assortment of artwork, posters and photographs. I have collaged them together to form a brilliantly colored mosaic that spans the width of my dorm room wall. The images I choose to display all reflect some aspect of my interests, affiliation and personality. Author Joan Kron explores this connection between possessions and their symbolic meaning in her essay entitled, “The Semiotics of Home Décor.” The practice of semiotic analysis is concerned with the interpretation of cultural and behavioral symbolism. This viewpoint is useful in evaluating how the furnishings and decoration of a space is revealing of personal expression. Possessions are used as visual messages to communicate with other people.

In observing my own belongings as well as others’, I have found that there are many reasons why people are so connected to things. Possessions often carry a very personal meaning. Objects of sentimental value are the trappings of the past; usually they have a story or memory attached. Of my own possessions, the ones that are most valuable to me serve as reminders of times and places that are dear to me. The worth of these objects has nothing to do with money, but rather what they represent. I have a collection of drawings and paintings on my wall. Some are of my own creation; others have been given to me by friends. These pieces are a testament of my background and appreciation for art. Another part of my wall is covered with pictures of my friends and I, rock climbing, hiking, and on vacation in the mountains. My interest in the outdoors and adventure has a lot to do with my values and aspirations in life. These pictures are more than just snapshots, they represent personal achievements. By putting them on my wall for everyone to see, I am saying, “This is what I do, this is who I am.” But possessions are not used solely to define individual identity. Often, they are tools in the competition for social prowess.

The value of objects as status symbols is important to some people. The very fact that things are referred to as “belongings” is revealing of the role that possessions play in a social context. It has been my observation that, often, possessions are acquired in order to identify with a certain group. In her essay, Kron cited the work of sociologists Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi and Eugene Rochberg-Halton. In their book, The Meaning of Things: Domestic Symbols of the Self, they comment, “Things are cherished not because of the material comfort they provide but for the information they convey about the owner and his or her ties to
others” (Kron 100). High status items like expensive furniture, stereos or perhaps famous artwork are used to present an image of wealth or prestige. Such items are used to distinguish their owner by their connection to the object. The “rich” symbolism attached to designer labels and brand names is desirable because the qualities of the “goods” are projected onto the person that possesses them. The message sent by status goods is a deliberate cry of victory, saying, “I have what it takes.”

Regardless of the message, objects hold power in their ability to communicate. When I was decorating my dorm room, I put up a poster for a Broadway show that I saw this past winter. The poster is of images of performers from the show RENT. As I was doing this, a guy walked past my door and stopped to talk to my roommate. I had not met him before, but when he saw my poster he commented, “So, I see you're a thespian?” That image spoke for me without me even having to explain its significance. From the display of a single object, a total stranger was able to draw a conclusion about me. In this case it was correct. However, not every image is recognizable for the intended message.

No two minds are alike. Everyone sees different symbolism connected to objects. One single object may represent a number of things. The meaning is as diverse as the imagination of the observer. The language of symbolism is abstract. Just because possessions have the ability to send a message, there is no guarantee that the message will be received correctly. Kron summarizes, “The identity we express is subject to interpretation by others” (Kron 104). A picture can be worth a thousand words. However, the sometimes vague nature of symbolism cannot be relied on to tell the entire story.

Works Cited