Narratives and Counter-Narratives of International Law in the Gift Shops of the Peace Palace and United Nations

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Abstract

Material approaches to international law have emerged as a new way to understand how international law structures our world. One particular object of international law serves as the basis of examination in this paper – the souvenirs that are sold at both the United Nations(UN) Headquarters gift shop in New York and the gift shop at the Peace Palace in The Hague. Drawing on literature on material studies as well as the material culture of tourism and souvenirs, this paper explores the narratives of international law presented in the objects available for sale at the UN and Peace Palace and examines some of the tensions inherent in the merchandising of international law through souvenirs.

Keywords

International Law – materiality – materialism – souvenirs

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I. Introduction

In recent years, international law scholarship has seen the emergence of the so-called 'material turn'[1] – the study of the physical, tangible objects that are connected to international law and what the study of such objects reveals about international law more generally. The study of the material objects of international law including, for example, such objects as postage stamps[2] and road signs,[3] sits alongside expanded critical analyses of international law, including of the architecture of international law institutions,[4] the marketing of international law,[5] on international law sightseeing and tourism,[6] on the aesthetics of international law,[7] and examinations of international law and its 'every day'.[8] In the spirit of this expanded examination of the materiality of international law, this paper looks at a specific type of international law object – the souvenirs that are sold at the gift and souvenir shops at the United Nations headquarters (UN) in New York,[9] and at the Peace Palace, which houses the Permanent Court of Arbitration and the International Court of Justice (ICJ) in The Hague.[10]

In undertaking this study of the souvenirs sold at the UN and the Peace Palace, this paper draws on the rich vein of social theory on the act of tourism, specifically the meaning inherent in the production and acquisition

1 See generally Jessie Hohmann and Daniel Joyce (eds), *International Law's Objects* (Oxford University Press 2019); and Jessie Hohmann, 'Treaty Documents: Materialising International Legal Agreement' in: Katherine Biber, Trish Luker and Priya Vaughan (eds), *Law's Documents: Authority, Materiality, Aesthetics* (Routledge 2021), 159-177.

2 Jessie Hohmann, 'Diffuse Subjects and Dispersed Power: New Materialist Insights and Cautionary Lessons for International Law', LJIL 34 (2021), 585-606.

3 Jacqueline Mowbray, 'Breton Road Signs' in: Jessie Hohmann and Daniel Joyce (eds), *International Law's Objects* (Oxford University Press 2019), 173-181.

4 Miriam Bak McKenna, 'Designing for International Law: The Architecture of International Organizations 1922-1952', LJIL 34 (2021), 1-22; and Renske Vos and Sofia Stolk, 'Law in Concrete: Institutional Architecture in Brussels and The Hague', Law and Humanities 14 (2020), 57-82.

5 Christine Schwöbel-Patel, Marketing Global Justice: The Political Economy of International Criminal Law (Cambridge University Press 2021).

6 See for example the *Legal Sightseeing* project at <https://legalsightseeing.wordpress.com/>, last accessed 16 August 2024; and Renske Vos and Sofia Stolk, 'International Legal Sightseeing', LJIL 33 (2020), 1-11.

7 Ed Morgan, *The Aesthetics of International Law* (University of Toronto Press 2016); Sebastian Machado, 'Towards an Aesthetic Epistemology of International Law', Nord. J. Int'l L. 91 (2022), 509-531.

8 Luis Eslava, Local Space, Global Life: The Everyday Operation of International Law and Development (Cambridge University Press 2015); and Tommaso Soave, The Everyday Makers of International Law: From Great Halls to Back Rooms (Cambridge University Press, 2022).

9 <https://shop.un.org/>, last access 16 August 2024.

10 <https://www.vredespaleis.nl/webshop/?lang=en>, last access 16 August 2024.

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of the souvenirs that tourists and travellers purchase while on holiday.[11] In the critical literature on souvenirs, souvenirs are understood to not only commemorate the experience of travel post facto,[12] but as a mechanism by which the returned tourist can convey to others an idea of their values and beliefs.[13] Such objects allow the returned tourist to publicly communicate a narrative of their self and their identity, through the specific objects they have chosen to bring home with them.[14]

However, it is possible to see the inverse to this idea of the souvenir serving as representative of the identity. Souvenirs, in particular souvenirs that are uniquely tied to a particular venue or locale and are only sold at that specific site, can also serve as conveying a narrative of the venue or site. That is to say, an institution that commissions and exclusively sells a particular item at their gift shop is, arguably, trying to present its own particular narrative, and its own story of its *raison d'etre*. Therefore, when the UN gift shop sells a unique toy, or the Peace Palace gift shop a unique piece of clothing, both these institutions are engaging in a discourse regarding their meaning and purpose through the objects they present for public consumption.

With this theory in mind, and drawing on the literature on material studies of international law, this paper explores the following question: if souvenirs tell a story, what story of international law is being told through the souvenirs sold at two of the foundational institutions of international law – the UN and the Peace Palace? Moreover, what do our own perceptions and pre-existing notions of the role of international law play in our reading of the souvenirs of international law?

The study of souvenirs of international law undertaken in this paper is part of a larger research project undertaken by a team of international law scholars

11 Danielle M. Lasusa, 'Eiffel Tower Key Chains and Other Pieces of Reality: The Philosophy of Souvenirs', The Philosophical Forum 38 (2007), 271-287; Michael Haldrup and Jonas Larsen, 'Material Cultures of Tourism', Leisure Studies 25 (2006), 275-289; Beverly Gordon, 'The Souvenir: Messenger of the Extraordinary', The Journal of Popular Culture 20 (1986), 135-146; Alain Decrop and Julie Masset, '"This Is a Piece of Coral Received from Captain Bob": Meanings and Functions of Tourist Souvenirs', Consumer Behavior in Tourism and Hospitality 8 (2014), 22-34.

12 Erik Cohen, 'Souvenir' in: Jafar Jafari (ed.), *Encyclopedia of Tourism* (Routledge 2000), 547-548 (548); Luella Anderson and Mary-Ann Littrell, 'Souvenir-Purchase Behavior of Women Tourists', Annals of Tourism Research 22 (1995), 328-348 (328).

13 Michael Haldrup, 'Souvenirs: Magical Objects in Everyday Life', Emotion, Space and Society 22 (2017), 52-60 (53).

14 Kristen K. Swanson and Dallen J. Timothy, 'Souvenirs: Icons of Meaning, Commercialization and Commoditization', Tourism Management 33 (2012), 489-499 (492); Julie Masset and Alain Decrop, 'Meanings of Tourist Souvenirs: From the Holiday Experience to Everyday Life', Journal of Travel Research 60 (2021), 718-734 (726-730).

at the University of Sydney,[15] the University of Technology Sydney,[16] and the University of New South Wales.[17] Our project, entitled *At the Vanishing Point: Encounters with the Souvenirs, Merchandise and Memorabilia of International Law*, encompasses an exhibition,[18] social media sites,[19] and, eventually, a website. In our exhibition, we curated over 40 different souvenirs and pieces of merchandise connected to international law and international institutions, including, for example, objects sold only at gift shops in institutions like the United Nations, and objects sold in collaboration with international bodies like the United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF). We used these objects to examine and interrogate the manifold ways in which international law manifests itself on the material plane and highlight the different ways in which international law and its institutions are memorialised, commodified, and represented in the public sphere.

This paper narrows its focus to four of the items from the exhibition – specifically, items which, as of this writing, are currently sold at the gift shops at the Peace Palace and UN Headquarters. From the gift shop at the Peace Palace, comes a silk scarf, reprinted with the tapestries hanging in the Japanese Room at the Peace Palace, and from the gift shop at UN Headquarters in New York comes a children's toy helmet, a replica of the blue helmets worn by UN peacekeepers; a small squeezable 'stress ball', emblazoned with the UN logo and the word 'peace'; and a Rubik's cube, decorated with the seventeen colours and images of the UN's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Two of these items – the scarf and the helmet – seemingly draw on narratives of international law and its institutions as significant forces for the pursuit and maintenance of global peace, security, and prosperity. However, the stress ball and the Rubik's cube potentially tell a counter-narrative to the stated purposes of the Peace Palace and the UN. Rather than communicating the story of international law as an inexorable journey towards international peace and security, the stress ball and the Rubik's cube suggest that the

15 Professor Emily Crawford, <https://www.sydney.edu.au/law/about/our-people/academic-staff/emily-crawford.html>, last access 16 August 2024 and Associate Professor Jacqueline Mowbray, <https://www.sydney.edu.au/law/about/our-people/academic-staff/jacqueline-mowbray.html>, last access 16 August 2024.

16 Professor Jessie Hohmann, <https://profiles.uts.edu.au/Jessie.Hohmann>, last access 16 August 2024.

17 Associate Professor Daniel Joyce, <https://www.unsw.edu.au/staff/daniel-joyce>, last access 16 August 2024.

18 <https://www.instagram.com/sydney_library/p/C7VUiLnPc3-/?img_index=1>, last access 16 August 2024.

19 On Instagram, @atthevanishingpoint and on Twitter/X, @intlawbarbie.

process towards achieving the aim of international peace and security is a fragmented and frustrating experience.

II. Materialism, Objects, and International Law

To understand how souvenirs sold at the gift shops of the UN and Peace Palace might tell a story about international law, it is first useful to explore, if only briefly (indeed, simplistically), the social theory of materiality and material objects, and, in particular, how those theories have been applied to international law. Materiality and material culture, are at a broad and basic level, centred on the notion that objects are not 'inert and mute, set in motion and animated, indeed knowable, only by persons and their words'.[20] Materiality and material culture instead posits that objects and things have social lives – they have meaning 'inscribed in their forms, their uses, their trajectories';[21] objects 'speak',[22] as Marcel Mauss argues. Objects have, as Bruno Latour has argued, 'agency'[23] and materialist approaches to these objects ask us 'not to see things as all being dead in the same way (merely material, all composed of atoms), but being potentially alive in their own unique ways'.[24]

Material culture and materiality therefore examine 'what people do with objects […] and what objects do with or for people'.[25] A useful example of how material culture makes sense of the world is forwarded by Terence McDonnell, who, taking a handgun as a case study, notes that:

> 'A material culture approach to guns might examine gun culture – how pockets of social life focally organise around guns, from military to gun clubs, to paintball and rifle hunting […] [while] a focus on the materiality of guns would examine how the qualities of guns shape their use: how gun size permits concealed carry […] how its weight and recall may make it difficult to fire accurately.'[26]

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20 Arjun Appadurai, 'Introduction: Commodities and the Politics of Value' in: Arjun Appadurai (ed.), *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective* (Cambridge University Press 1986), 3-63 (4).

21 Appadurai (n. 20), 5.

22 Marcel Mauss, *The Gift* (Routledge Classics 2002), 56.

23 Bruno Latour, Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory (Oxford 2005), 63; see also Bruno Latour, An Inquiry into Modes of Existence: An Anthropology of the Moderns (Harvard University Press 2013).

24 Stephen Muecke and Carsten Wergin, 'Materialities of Tourism in the Twenty-First Century: A Very Brief Introduction', Tourist Studies 14 (2014), 227-230 (227).

25 Terence McDonnell, 'Cultural Objects, Material Culture, and Materiality', Annual Review of Sociology (2023), 195-220 (199).

26 McDonnell (n. 25), 200.

Materiality and material culture offers a way to understand and theorise the manifold meanings and purposes inherent in a 'simple object' – the meaning and purpose intended for the object and the meaning and purpose the object reveals through acquisition and use, intended or otherwise.

How then does this theory of objects and their meaning relate to law, and international law specifically?[27] By examining material objects that are connected to international law (for instance, a passport or a postage stamp, rather than the text of a treaty), there is the potential to explore and examine international law in different ways. Material approaches to international law can offer an interesting entry point into different ways to interpret and understand international law and what it aims to achieve. As Hohmann has noted, 'objects, from the mundane to the museum piece' give us new ways to 'think through how material things and laws are co-constituted, and to decentre text as the main arena for legal interpretation'.[28]

In engaging with materialist thinking when examining objects that have a connection to the international plane and to the legal processes that constitute that plane, such as a passport, for example, we can see that the object is not simply a mono-purposed item – for example, a booklet to enable the crossing of an international boundary, serving as a legal verification of identity and nationality. Rather, a materialist approach to international law objects can uncover multiple meanings, purposes, narratives, and biographies. A passport can serve as testimony to, for example, the historical record of the constitution of the nation State and its international boundary; the patents and other legal frameworks connected to the special ink and paper required to fabricate the passport; the legal construction of identity and nationality, such that allows a person to acquire a particular passport (or multiple passports); and the laws connected to freedom of movement across international borders. A passport can be the vessel through which to examine multiple facets of international law, ranging from nationality and diplomatic protection to international human rights, to intellectual property, to boundary delimitations. By examining the material objects of international law, we can see 'international law as a specific kind of material practice: a practice that "creates" and "takes place" through the very materiality of the world'.[29]

27 See for example, Alain Pottage, 'The Materiality of What?', J. L. & Soc. 39 (2012), 167-183; Fleur Johns, 'Things to Make and Do' in: Jessie Hohmann and Daniel Joyce (eds), *International Law's Objects* (Oxford University Press 2019) and Werner Wouter, 'Framing Objects of International Law' in: Jessie Hohmann and Daniel Joyce (eds), *International Law's Objects* (Oxford University Press 2019).

28 Hohmann, 'Diffuse Subjects' (n. 2), 589.

29 Luis Eslava and Sundhya Pahuja, 'Beyond the (Post)Colonial: TWAIL and the Everyday Life of International Law', Journal of Law and Politics in Africa, Asia and Latin America – Verfassung und Recht in Übersee 45 (2012), 195-221 (203).

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This is not to say that *every* material object, in particular, objects with only tangential connections to the international realm, necessarily convey the narrative of the entirety of the international law project. Not every object that genuinely claims connections to international law could or should be interrogated for how it structures the international legal system and our relation to that system. As Eslava notes:

> 'Asserting that the history of international law resides in our material surroundings does not mean that "all" the history of the international legal order and "all" of the history of the world resides in "all" the objects that surround us. The point here is instead to appreciate the widespread effects of the evolution of international law, and its inseparability from the production, organisation and reorganisation of our material world, as well as from out political, economic and social realities.'[30]

Moreover, it would be simplistic to believe that there is only one possible material understanding of or approach to international law. As noted by Dimitri van den Meerssche, there are 'multiple materialisms of international law',[31] with historical approaches centring how the material basis at the heart of capitalism and capital accumulation[32] has shaped international law, while new materialist approaches can be seen as transcending and even rejecting sociological binaries of 'mind/matter, nature/culture, human/nonhuman'[33] to embrace the notion that it is possible to view the world as we know it as deriving 'power and vibrancy'[34] from multiple sources and that there is a complex 'performative process through which certain subjects [come] to matter while others are excluded from mattering'.[35]

The preceding analysis is obviously an oversimplification of materialist theory. However, even with this crude understanding of how international law produces our political, economic, and social reality, we can find deep meanings in how international law 'unfolds on the mundane and "every-day" plane through sites and objects that might, at first glance, appear unrelated to the lofty international'.[36] Observing the objects of international law allows us to see how, as Eslava and Sundhya Pahuja have argued, international law is

30 Luis Eslava, 'The Materiality of International Law: Violence, History and Joe Sacco's The Great War', London Review of International Law 5 (2017), 49-86 (80).

31 Dimitri van den Meerssche, "The Multiple Materialisms of International Law', London Review of International Law 11 (2023), 197-206 (200).

32 van den Meerssche (n. 31), 197.

33 van den Meerssche (n. 31), 198.

34 van den Meerssche (n. 31), 198.

35 van den Meerssche (n. 31), 198.

36 Eslava, 'Materiality of International Law' (n. 30), 80.

not just 'an ideological project with material consequences' but also 'a material project in itself'.[37]

With this in mind, this paper turns now to examine how souvenirs sold at international institutions might provide us with new ways of thinking about international law, its objectives, and its purposes. In particular, what kinds of stories and narratives of international law are being told through the souvenirs sold at international institutions like the United Nations and the Peace Palace? To help answer this question, this paper now turns to look at the literature on the philosophy and material culture of souvenirs and what meanings can be ascribed to the production, sale, and acquisition of souvenirs.

III. The Philosophy and Materiality of Souvenirs as Conveyers of Meaning

There is considerable theoretical literature on the material culture of tourism – the study of the meanings inherent in how and why tourists 'interact corporeally with umbrellas, walking boots, sunglasses, sun beds, benches, walking paths, sand beaches, souvenirs, maps, suitcases, cars, cameras and many other things and physical places'.[38] A material study of tourism envisages the act of travel and tourism as, at its core, a social activity, but notes that tourism 'cannot be reduced to the social because it is relationally linked to a wide variety of objects, machines, texts, systems, non-humans, spaces and so on, without which it would not happen and could not have become what it is'.[39] If materialist approaches to the world argue that 'resources, objects, spaces and technologies are much more than simply the outcrops of human intention and action. They also structure, define and configure interaction',[40] then tourism, from a materialism perspective, is a process by which the world is ordered in 'a complex mesh of human and non-human'.[41]

As one of the material objects of tourism, souvenirs have occupied a particularly vital part of the literature on tourism, and much has been written

37 Eslava and Pahuja (n. 29), 202.

38 Hadrup and Larsen (n. 11), 275.

39 René van der Duim, 'Tourism, Materiality and Space' in: Irena Ateljevic, Annette Pritchard and Nigel Morgan (eds) *The Critical Turn in Tourism Studies* (Routledge 2007), 149-163 (150).

40 van der Duim (n. 39), 151.

41 Alex Franklin, *Tourism: An Introduction* (Sage 2003), 279; see also Adrian Franklin, 'Tourism as Ordering. Towards a New Ontology of Tourism', Tourist Studies 4 (2003), 277-301.

about what meanings can be ascribed to the acquisition of souvenirs during the act of travel and tourism – what roles souvenirs play in structuring, defining, and configuring the tourist experience of the world. As with all material objects, souvenirs, as material markers of the act of tourism and travel, serve multiple functions and carry multiple meanings.

At the most basic level, souvenirs are 'memorable tangible reminders of [a tourist's] special time',[42] serving as a material reminder and public demonstration of the journey to and experience of the destination visited. Indeed, this notion of the souvenir as a public marker draws on the etymology of the word 'souvenir' – borrowed from the French *souvenir*, meaning an act of remembering, a memory or a narration or account of memories.[43] *Souvenir* denotes something both tangible and intangible – the intangible being the presence of a memory or the act of remembering[44] and the tangible being the material object given or kept as a reminder of a place or event, usually associated with the act of travel and tourism.[45] A souvenir can be both noun and verb – the act of physically possessing of a tangible object, as well as engaging in an intangible act of the mind.[46]

Another way of theorising the souvenir posits that souvenirs, even mass-produced and anodyne objects like magnets or pens, are in fact transformed into something sacrosanct by virtue of the tourist having acquired them while travelling – that the sheer act of acquiring an object while on holiday somehow elevates the object from mundane to sacred. According to this theory, the act of tourism is conceived of as a revered, extraordinary activity. In undertaking an action of tourism, the tourist breaks from:

> 'their ordinary (profane) life to travel to destinations that are divorced from the profane space of the everyday and mentally consecrated as sacred sites of leisure and travel. While the souvenir is removed physically from the sacred experience of travel, it stands in proxy for the extraordinary once the tourist returns to his or her ordinary environment. Souvenirs allow people to move symbolically between the

42 Pavlos Paraskevaidis and Konstantinos Andriotis, 'Values of Souvenirs as Commodities', Tourism Management 48 (2015), 1-10 (1).

43 Oxford English Dictionary, s. v. 'souvenir (n.), Etymology', July 2023, https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/6774825279. However, see also Michael Hitchcock, 'Souvenirs: How They May or May Not Be Understood', Finnish Journal of Tourism Research 17 (2021), 15-22 (15), who traces the term 'souvenir' through French, English, Greek, Japanese, and Indonesian languages and traditions.

44 Oxford English Dictionary, s. v. 'souvenir (n.), sense 1.a,' July 2023, https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/1282289498.

45 Oxford English Dictionary, s. v. 'souvenir (n.), sense 2.a,' July 2023, https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/9625226842.

46 See also Hugh Wilkins, 'Souvenirs: What and Why We Buy' Journal of Travel Research 50 (2011), 239-247 (243).

> mundane, ordinary and profane bounds of home, and the extraordinary "sacred" places and "other" times associated with their travels.'[47]

The souvenir, and the unique context in which it is acquired, transforms even the most mundane item into a 'memento of an event or experience with heightened meaning and symbolic transcendence'.[48] In this way, the souvenir becomes more than just a material reminder of the physical experience of travel, but rather a 'messenger of the extraordinary'.[49] Indeed, this line of thinking draws on what some have argued is the origin of the concept of the souvenir – those religious relics and artefacts, such as fragments of the true cross, or water from the River Jordan, that devout believers on pilgrimages to holy sites would acquire.[50] By theorising the souvenir as a totem of a sacred experience, souvenirs are conceived of as existing on the same plane as holy relics – material evidence of sacrosanct spiritual experiences.

Another strain of thinking about souvenirs posits that souvenirs are acquired as a means to communicate a narrative of self – that souvenirs are a mechanism by which the tourist can construct and convey a particular self-identity to their community, upon their return from their travels.[51] Souvenirs therefore tell a narrative of and about the purchaser;[52] as a particular form of consumption, the souvenir can 'mark our place in the social order and helps us understand how that order comes about and how it is reproduced'.[53] By acquiring and displaying particular types of souvenir, such as traditional handicrafts or novelty comedic housewares like fridge magnets or glassware, the tourist-traveller can present a particular narrative of self to the outside world, for example, as an educated connoisseur of unique and rare artisan craftwork. In this respect, the tourist is using souvenirs not just to remind themselves of their journey, and to savour part of a sacred experience in their

47 Swanson and Timothy (n. 14), 492.

48 Swanson and Timothy (n. 14), 491.

49 Gordon (n. 11), 135.

50 See generally Michael Houlihan, 'Souvenirs with Soul: 800 Years of Pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela' in: Michael Hitchcock and Ken Teague (eds), *Souvenirs: The Material Culture of Tourism* (Ashgate 2000), 18-24; Myra Shackley, 'Empty Bottles at Sacred Sites: Religious Retailing at Ireland's National Shrine' in: Dallen J. Timothy and Daniel H. Olsen (eds), *Tourism, Religion and Spiritual Journeys* (Routledge 2000), 94-103.

51 See e. g., Hugh Wilkins, 'Souvenirs and Self-Identity' in: Jenny Cave, Lee Jolliffe and Tom Baum (eds), *Tourism and Souvenirs: Glocal Perspectives from the Margins* (Channel View Publications 2013), 40-48; Jacqueline Eastman, Ronald Goldsmith and Leisa Flynn, 'Status Consumption in Consumer Behavior: Scale Development and Validation', Journal of Marketing Theory and Practice 7 (1999), 41-52.

52 See generally Wilkins, 'Souvenirs: What and Why We Buy' (n. 46), 239-247; Gordon (n. 11).

53 Frank Trentman, Empire of Thing: How We Became a World of Consumers, From the Fifteenth Century to the Twenty-First (Harper Collins 2016), 484.

profane everyday, but rather, souvenirs serve as a medium through which to project that sacred outward.[54] By purchasing souvenirs, in particular unique or expensive souvenirs, the tourist-traveller is engaging in and projecting a particular form of 'actual or aspirational self-perception'.[55] They are demonstrating to the world at large that they have the time and the resources to travel, and the liquidity to acquire and return with what are frequently decorative material goods, goods that serve no particular functional purpose. In this respect, the tourist uses the souvenir as a 'commodity to demonstrate financial wealth and [as] a measure for ego-enhancement'.[56]

However, if souvenirs can be seen as a medium through which consumers convey their narratives of self, it might be possible to see the inverse at play also: that the producers and purveyors of these souvenirs are themselves engaging in narrative discourse and are attempting to present a narrative of their *own* meaning and purpose, through the objects that they present for consumption and acquisition. It is this notion that is explored in the next section of this paper, looking at the souvenirs sold at international institutions as case studies of this idea of souvenirs as a narrative of identity.

IV. Narratives of International Law at the Gift Shops of the UN and Peace Palace

If souvenirs can be seen as a medium through which consumers convey their narratives of self, then the producers and purveyors of these souvenirs may themselves be engaging in narrative discourse. By selling particular items, particular sites and institutions can themselves be seen as engaging in a form of narrative of self – presenting a narrative that they wish the consumer to take away with them following a visit to that site or institution. Souvenir producers thus sell an idea of themselves in their objects[57] – as Graburn notes,

> 'souvenirs are not just specific objects per se, but are material items with a relationship to someone or something else, usually in the past. That is to say, they have a memorial meaning or, from the manufacturer's or seller's point of view, they

54 Nigel Morgan and Annette Pritchard, 'On Souvenirs and Metonymy: Narratives of Memory, Metaphor and Materiality', Tourist Studies 5 (2005), 29-53 (33).

55 Wilkins, 'Souvenirs and Self-Identity' (n. 51), 41.

56 Friedericke Kuhn, 'Conspicuous Souvenirs: Analysing Touristic Self-Presentation Through Souvenir Display' Tourist Studies 20 (2020), 485-504 (505).

57 Swanson and Timothy (n. 14), 492.

are intended to function by having that kind of meaning for the acquirer or purchaser.'[58]

Souvenirs can be seen as an act of mediation and management by the seller – an attempt to 'control the outside world's image of themselves'.[59]

With this in mind, what then is the UN saying about itself and about international law through its souvenirs, in particular those items that are directly sold by international law institutions – pieces clearly commissioned by gift shops at the Peace Palace or UN headquarters and meant to be sold only through those institutional gift shops? These gift shop items present an interesting narrative – sometimes an unintentionally interesting narrative – of what the UN and other international institutions think about themselves, and what these institutions want people to 'take away' from them – both literally and figuratively.

To better understand why and how the extant objects under examination in this paper came to be selected for such examination, it is necessary, firstly, to situate these objects in context – namely, that, as noted previously, the souvenirs scrutinised in this paper form part of a larger research project, entitled *At the Vanishing Point: Encounters with the Souvenirs, Merchandise, and Memorabilia of International Law*, and formed part of larger exhibitions in Wellington, New Zealand, and Sydney, Australia in 2023. Driven by a team of international law scholars, *At the Vanishing Point* was initially guided by our own material encounters with international law. As noted in the exhibition's curatorial essay:

> 'As scholars of international law, we have long been interested in the disconnect between international law's deep embeddedness in the world around us on the one hand, and the perception that international law is "remote and technical: something that happens only far away at the UN, or when world leaders shake hands at lavish, highly securitised summits" on the other. We each have an interest in the material dimension of international law: its objects, its aesthetic qualities, its public consumption and commodification.'[60]

Drawing on our own interests in the material culture, aesthetics, and objects of international law,[61] we then turned to our own material engage-

58 Nelson H. H. Graburn, 'Foreword' in: Michael Hitchcock and Ken Teague (eds), *Souvenirs: The Material Culture of Tourism* (Ashgate 2000), xii-xvii (xiii).

59 Michael Hitchcock, 'Introduction' in: Michael Hitchcock and Ken Teague (eds), *Souvenirs: The Material Culture of Tourism* (Ashgate 2000), 1-17 (2).

60 Emily Crawford, Jessie Hohmann, Daniel Joyce and Jacqueline Mowbray, *At the Vanishing Point: Encounters with the Souvenirs, Merchandise and Memorabilia of International Law*, <https://hdl.handle.net/2123/31964>, 6 (references omitted), last access 21 August 2024.

61 Hohmann and Joyce (n. 1); Hohmann, 'Diffuse Subjects' (n. 2); Mowbray (n. 3).

ment with international law and our own phenomenological experience of the objects of international law, by looking more critically at the souvenirs we had all accrued because of our professional careers as international lawyers – the various pens and mugs from international organisations and scholarly centres, the postcards and notepads and other ephemera we had collected while on research trips to the International Court of Justice in The Hague, the United Nations in New York and Vienna, or the International Committee of the Red Cross headquarters in Geneva.[62]

By examining at the commercial objects of international law, we wanted to explore differing ways to approach how international law presents itself, either intentionally or inadvertently. As we noted in our curatorial essay for *At the Vanishing Point*,

> 'by engaging with questions of popular understanding of international law, publics can engage with otherwise technical and professional concerns, and international lawyers can see their concerns mediated through the symbolic, the sentimental, the mediated and in commodified forms. In this exhibition, we explore how international law's symbolic capital is supported through souvenirs and other material objects. How is authority tied to objects and iconography? How does international law's merchandise allow us to comment on the relationship between capitalism and international law? How do objects become memorabilia, relics or fetishes for international law and international lawyers? And how do souvenirs allow for different readings of international law's claim to authority and relevance? Are memorabilia suggestive of a personal connection to a field which can appear grand, distant and abstract? Do souvenirs point to the historical and temporal qualities of international law and its contingent evolution?'[63]

Our curatorial essay more thoroughly explains our curatorial process and reasoning but for the purpose of *this* paper, it is sufficient to note that we selected souvenirs as one focus, as they were the most obvious way in which international institutions market themselves for mass consumption. Furthermore, given the wealth of literature on the meanings that can be communicated through the medium of souvenirs, this seemed an interesting avenue for exploration and examination.

What then of the specific souvenirs found at UN Headquarters and the Peace Palace. At first glance, if one were to focus solely on the generic and anodyne in the gift shop, one might only find a particularly generic or anodyne narrative – the pens and mugs of the UN arguably tell us little about what the UN or ICJ thinks of its place in the world order. But when we start

62 Crawford, Hohmann, Joyce and Mowbray (n. 60).
63 Crawford, Hohmann, Joyce and Mowbray (n. 60), 9.

looking at the more unusual objects, that's when a much more interesting narrative might begin to emerge.

It should come as no surprise that many of the souvenirs one can find at the UN and Peace Palace gift shops seemingly tell a story of these institutions as bastions of peace, justice, and international harmony and cooperation. For example, at the Peace Palace gift shop, you can buy a handmade silk scarf, one specifically commissioned for sale solely at the Peace Palace gift shop, printed with a copy of the silk tapestries that adorn the Palace's Japanese Room.[64]

The tapestries in question were donated by the Japanese government to the Palace during its building, and currently hang in the Japanese Room[65] – itself so-named because of the donation. As noted by Aalberts and Stolk,

> 'Japan put much time and energy into the production of its gift – nine panels of woven silk wall tapestries (or "gobelin") entitled "Hundred flowers and hundred birds in late spring and early summer" – which was one of the first to arrive at the Palace. From the outset, the Japanese contribution was highly praised and their gobelin continues to be one of the most valued artworks in the Palace.'[66]

The Japanese Room currently serves as one of the court and hearing rooms in the Palace available for inter-State arbitration. The Room also houses other items donated by States during the building of the Palace, including large Chinese cloisonné temple vases, which were donated by the last emperor of China,[67] and the reputed 'largest Hereke carpet in the world outside of Türkiye',[68] donated by the Ottoman Empire. As a place where inter-State disputes are heard and resolved, the Japanese Room therefore embodies the stated aim of the Peace Palace – that of serving as an 'icon of peace through law'.[69] In this respect, the Japanese Room, as well as the Peace Palace at large, 'is more than just a venue where international law is practiced: it provides a material home for the emergent international community and thereby helped to sing this 'imagined community' into existence'.[70] The scarf, depicting the

64 <https://www.vredespaleis.nl/webshop/shawl-japanese-room/?lang=en>, last access 21 August 2024.

65 <https://www.vredespaleis.nl/peace-palace/interior/masterpieces/?lang=en>, last access 21 August 2024.

66 Tanja Aalberts and Sofia Stolk, 'Building (of) the International Community: A History of the Peace Palace Through Transnational Gifts and Local Bureaucracy', London Review of International Law 10 (2022), 169-202 (195).

67 <https://www.vredespaleis.nl/peace-palace/interior/masterpieces/chinese-vases/?lang=en>, last access 21 August 2024.

68 <https://www.vredespaleis.nl/peace-palace/interior/an-international-collection/turkiye/?lang=en>, last access 21 August 2024.

69 <https://www.vredespaleis.nl/?lang=en>, last access 21 August 2024.

70 Aalberts and Stolk (n. 66), 172.

tapestries in a room that serves to peacefully resolve interstate disputes can itself be seen as materially embodying the aims of peace through law, in this case, through the medium of a 90 cm^2 piece of silk. Indeed, by recreating the tapestries onto a scarf, a notably different material experience emerges. Installed as fixed objects in an enclosed space, the tapestries, as recreated on the scarf, become more fluid and dynamic – they now sing the imagined international community outside the confines of the Palace.

Turning now to the UN gift shop, there one can buy a toy 'peacekeepers helmet',[71] a child-sized replica of the helmets worn by UN peacekeepers.

Coloured the same blue[72] as the actual helmets worn by UN peacekeepers when on deployment,[73] this costume accessory seems to suggest that, rather than playing war games and pretending to fight one another, children can instead play at peacekeeping and providing help to others. In selling such an item at the UN gift shop, the institution is repeating the narrative of the institution, and of international law more generally, as a force for good; one that 'helps countries navigate the difficult path from conflict to peace',[74] and that peacekeeping is 'one of the most effective tools available to the United Nations in the promotion and maintenance of international peace and security'.[75]

V. Inadvertent Narratives in the Souvenirs of International Law

However, there are several items that can be purchased at the UN that suggest an inadvertent counter-narrative to that of international law as a unifying force for peace and security. For example, the UN gift shop currently sells an UN-branded 'peace' stress ball.[76]

71 <https://shop.un.org/merch/un-peacekeeper-toy-helmet-25173>, last access 21 August 2024.

72 UN Blue was selected as the colour of choice for the UN in UNGA Res 167 (II) of 20 October 1947, A/RES/167(II), <https://documents.un.org/doc/resolution/gen/nr0/038/74/pdf/nr003874.pdf>, last access 21 August 2024; See also <https://ask.un.org/faq/209615>, last access 21 August 2024, regarding the origins of UN Blue, which has a designated Pantone number of Pantone 2925 – <https://www.un.org/styleguide/pdf/UN_brand_identity_quick_guide_2020.pdf>, last access 21 August 2024.

73 <https://peacekeeping.un.org/en/military>, last access 21 August 2024.

74 <https://peacekeeping.un.org/en>, last access 21 August 2024.

75 <https://peacekeeping.un.org/en/what-is-peacekeeping>, last access 21 August 2024.

76 <https://shop.un.org/merch/un-emblem-eco-stress-relief-ball-25180>, last access 21 August 2024.

It's a palm sized rubber ball that one is meant to squeeze tightly to alleviate one's stress and anxiety. As described on the UN Shop website, its 'comfortable lycra covering' is filled with a 'semi-solid gel of recycled materials' and it 'provides therapeutic stress relief with unlimited squeezes'.[77] Complex feelings arise examining this – having a 'UN stress ball' emblazoned with the word peace might suggest something of a lack of faith on behalf of the UN in its own stated objectives, that of achieving 'peace, dignity and equality on a healthy planet'.[78] Leaving aside the ironic imagery inherent in the act of tightly squeezing an object with the word 'peace' on it, the UN stress ball seems to be saying that the path to peace is deeply stressful. This, at first glance, seems fair: the path to enduring international peace and security is obviously a stressful but ultimately worthy endeavour. However, it is the inclusion of the reference to 'unlimited squeezes' that is notable. Is a counter- or sub-narrative of the stress ball that unlimited squeezes are necessary because peace is something that is not achievable – that there is no way to achieve this end goal?

The UN gift shop also sells a Sustainable Development Goals Rubik's Cube.[79] By way of background, the seventeen Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)[80] were adopted in 2015 at the Sustainable Development Summit, with the aim to encourage States to work towards several objectives including ending all forms of poverty, protecting the environment, mitigating climate change, and ensuring that all persons have access to fundamental human rights such as good health, education. As part of the branding of the SDGs, the goals have been assigned specific colours and icons – for example, a fish under waves on a blue background represents the SDG 'Life Below Water' (which encourages the conservation and sustainable use of the oceans, seas, and marine resources for sustainable development). The bright colours and striking iconography of the SDGs seem to lend themselves to marketing and souvenirs – indeed, the Japanese toy company Sanrio has partnered with the UN to market 'Hello Kitty' and SDG co-branded souvenirs, capitalising on the colourful nature of the branding of the SDGs.[81]

Which brings us back to the SDG Rubik's cube – which has the seventeen SDGs spread across the six faces that make up the cube.

77 <https://shop.un.org/merch/un-emblem-eco-stress-relief-ball-25180>, last access 21 August 2024.

78 <https://www.un.org/en/>, last access 21 August 2024.

79 <https://shop.un.org/merch/sdg-rubiks-cube-25721>, last access 21 August 2024.

80 <https://sdgs.un.org/goals>, last access 21 August 2024.

81 <https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/blog/2019/09/united-nations-and-sanrio-launch-strategic-collaboration-to-promote-the-sustainable-development-goals/>, last access 21 August 2024.

To understand the inadvertent narrative of this souvenir, it is helpful to know that a Rubik's Cube is a three-dimensional puzzle cube, with each of the six faces of the cube comprising nine individual squares, and with each face a different solid colour – white, red, blue, orange, green, and yellow. The object of the puzzle is to scramble the sides and squares (known as 'cubies'[82]) so that each side comprises different colours in different sequences, and then to rearrange the cubies to the initial, mono-colour start position. The SDGs, with their own bright colours, would seem a good match for a puzzle that is based on bright colours.

However, a possible inadvertent narrative of the SDG Rubik's cube is a striking one. Solving a Rubik's cube is notoriously difficult. The inventor, Erno Rubik, reportedly spent a month trying to solve it the first time he scrambled the sides,[83] and entire fields of study have emerged regarding how to solve Rubik's cubes,[84] with mathematicians calculating that 'there are 43,252,003,274,489,856,000 ways to arrange the squares, but just one of those combinations is correct.'[85] Indeed, the term 'Rubik's Cube' has become a colloquialism for describing situations that are complex and difficult to solve.[86] Putting the SDGs on a puzzle that is notably difficult to solve would seem to present a perverse narrative – that the SDGs are a puzzle that is almost impossible to solve.

However, and as with the UN stress ball, even if one were to follow the (not unfair) reasoning that the SDGs are indeed complex problems that will be difficult to solve, an additional layer of absurdity presents itself. There are

82 Christophe Bandelow, *Inside Rubik's Cube and Beyond* (Birkhauser 1982), 2.

83 Alexandra Alter, 'He Invented the Rubik's Cube. He's Still Learning From It', The New York Times, 16 September 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/09/16/books/erno-rubik-rubiks-cube-inventor-cubed.html>, last access 21 August 2024.

84 Tomas Rokicki, 'Twenty-Two Moves Suffice for Rubik's Cube', The Mathematical Intelligencer 32 (2010), 33-40; Forest Agostinelli, Stephen McAleer, Alexander Shmakov and Pierre Baldi, 'Solving the Rubik's Cube with Deep Reinforcement Learning and Search', Nature Machine Intelligence 1 (2019), 356-363; Jishnu Jeevan and Madhu S. Nair, 'On the Performance Analysis of Solving the Rubik's Cube Using Swarm Intelligence Algorithms', Applied Artificial Intelligence 36 (2022), e2138129.

85 Alter (n. 83).

86 See for example the various academic articles that invoke the chaos of the Rubik's cube as a metaphor for a complex, potentially unsolvable situation – International Crisis Group, Iran and the P5+1: Solving the Nuclear Rubik's Cube, International Crisis Group 2022; Sudhir Mehta, Sudhir Bhandari and Shaurya Mehta, 'Brain Autopsies in Fatal COVID-19 and Postulated Pathophysiology: More Puzzling than a Rubik's Cube', Journal of Clinical Pathology 74 (2021), 612-613; Nicholas A. Heras and Kaleigh Thomas, *Solving the Syrian Rubik's Cube: An Instruction Guide for Leveraging Syria's Fragmentation to Achieve U.S. Policy Objectives* (Center for a New American Security 2022); Luigi Venco, Federica Marchesotti and Simone Manzocchi, 'Feline Heartworm Disease: A "Rubik's-Cube-like" Diagnostic and Therapeutic Challenge', Journal of Veterinary Cardiology 17 (2015), 190–201.

seventeen SDGs, but only six sides to a cube. If the entire point of a Rubik's cube is to align all alike colours, then the SDG Rubik's cube can never be solved, because the colours will never align – it is designed never to be solved. Again, this would seem to be an odd narrative for an object meant to promote desirable and theoretically achievable aims.

VI. Reflecting on the Souvenirs of International Law

If souvenirs do tell an origin story, then the souvenirs of international law present an interesting narrative. Those objects chosen, designed, and manufactured for sale at international institutions can be seen as telling a narrative of what we think international law is and does and what role those institutions believe they fulfil. On the one hand, the objects for sale at the UN and Peace Palace seem to celebrate international law as a force for good, objects that uphold the aims and objectives of the United Nations and its constituent bodies, including the International Court of Justice – as sites 'where all the world's nations can gather together, discuss common problems, and find shared solutions that benefit all of humanity'.[87] However, as noted, there is potentially a contradictory, or at least inadvertent, narrative being told in those objects like the Rubik's cube and the stress ball – that the course of international law, and international peace and security, is not necessarily an inexorable march towards lasting peace, but might be beset by dead-ends and missteps.

Of course, it would be remiss not to acknowledge that the purported narratives and counter-narratives of the scarf, helmet, cube, and squeeze ball, are subjective. While the UN is clear about its aims and objectives as a force for peace and security, our own perceptions of whether those aims are being (or can ever be) fulfilled obviously shape how we receive the outward manifestations of those aims – in this instance, through the medium of souvenirs. A cynical or defeatist reading of the aims and objectives of the UN and Peace Palace would obviously colour any reading of souvenirs sold by those institutions in furtherance of their work. This author's approach to a small sliver of the items available for purchase at the Peace Palace and United Nations represents only one possible way of looking at what is being sold by international institutions for mass public consumption. Of the scores of items for sale in New York and The Hague, many of them would likely say little about the nature and purpose of international law, deliberately or otherwise. Likewise, it is possible that a souvenir shopper at the UN or Peace Palace is

87 <https://www.un.org/en/about-us>, last access 21 August 2024.

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not engaging in this kind of analysis when choosing to buy a souvenir – tourists are likely not reading 'deep anxieties'[88] about the role of international law in the world order when buying an umbrella,[89] a keychain,[90] or magnet.[91]

Finally, it should be noted that those who are responsible for commissioning and acquiring objects for sale at the gift shops of the UN and ICJ are themselves likely not thinking too deeply about hidden or inadvertent narratives conveyed in the material objects they sell – arguably, the merchandise managers are probably *not* thinking that a plantable 'Kabloom Poppy Peacebomb'[92] (containing poppy seeds in a medium of recycled paper and organic compost that can be planted to grow poppies to commemorate 'peace and hope'[93]) presents a somewhat absurd and contradictory image, using the terminology of war (the 'bomb') to commemorate and encourage peace (though, arguably, perhaps they should). Indeed, it would be fascinating to further research this question – to inquire as to the process and procedures by which items (in particular unique or esoteric items) come to be sold at the UN and Peace Palace, whether or what vetting or oversight of items takes place before they are included in the inventory; and whether there has ever been concern regarding what intentional (or more likely, unintentional) messaging such items convey.

As the old aphorism most frequently (and incorrectly) attributed to Sigmund Freud goes, 'sometimes a cigar is just a cigar'.[94] In our study, it may well be that sometimes a squeeze ball is just a squeeze ball. But, conversely, sometimes we *can* read more into an object, such that, even when no deeper

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88 To borrow a phrase from George Williams, Hilary Charlesworth, Devika Hovell and Madeleine Chiam, 'Deep Anxieties: Australia and the International Legal Order', Sydney L. Rev. 25 (2003) 423-465.

89 <https://shop.un.org/merch/war-peace-umbrella-25726>, last access 21 August 2024.

90 <https://shop.un.org/merch/hello-kitty-sdg-keychain-25141>, last access 21 August 2024.

91 <https://www.vredespaleis.nl/webshop/magnet-peace-palace-5-colour-options/?lang=en>, last access 21 August 2024.

92 <https://www.vredespaleis.nl/webshop/kabloom-vredesbom/>, last access 21 August 2024.

93 <https://www.vredespaleis.nl/webshop/kabloom-vredesbom/>, last access 21 August 2024.

94 'Freud and His Cigars', Freud Museum London, <https://www.freud.org.uk/2020/04/22/freud-and-his-cigars/>, last access 21 August 2024. The quote seems to have first originated in a paper by Allen Wheelis (Allen Wheelis, 'The Place of Action in Personality Change', Psychiatry: Journal for the Study of Interpersonal Processes 13 (1950), 135-148), where at page 139, note 9, Wheelis warned about reading too much conscious and unconscious aims in particular actions by noting 'One errs, however, in inferring on every occasion, under whatever circumstances, that such a state of affairs obtains. This is still an occupational hazard of psychoanalysis – thirty years after Freud's famous remark that "a cigar is sometimes just a cigar"'. However, Wheelis cites no source for this statement in his paper.

thought was given to an object beyond it being beautiful[95] or functional,[96] it is open to us to discern deeper or different stories. For the purpose of this study, it is enough to reflect on some of the possible meanings that a materialism-informed approach to international law souvenirs might suggest. Where more conventional studies of international law might focus on textual interpretations of treaties, on how treaty and custom are applied in the practice of States or judicial bodies, or on how gaps and lacunae in the law are exposed due to social, political, and economic change, an examination of souvenirs of international law – seemingly mundane items that nonetheless owe their existence to international law – offers a novel and unusual way to reflect on how international law institutions engage in narrative discourses on their objectives and purpose.

VII. Concluding Comments

Material objects allow us a new way of exploring and examining our world – how it is constructed and how we make sense of that construction. In looking at international law through its objects, we 'can open up space for new ways of thinking about international law, its material impacts in the world, and the role of objects in making, authorising, and contesting it'.[97] In looking at the souvenirs sold at international law institutions, we can see a picture of international law that is perhaps apposite – an image of an occasionally chaotic and contradictory, frequently underwhelming and quotidian, but ultimately well-intentioned system trying to regulate equally chaotic and contradictory circumstances.

95 As noted on the Peace Palace Gift Shop website, the Japanese Room scarf is a 'beautiful shawl', <https://www.vredespaleis.nl/webshop/shawl-japanese-room/?lang=en>, last access 21 August 2024.

96 As the UN squeeze ball descriptive copy notes, it '[p]rovides therapeutic stress relief', <https://shop.un.org/merch/un-emblem-eco-stress-relief-ball-25180>, last access 21 August 2024.

97 Hohmann and Joyce (n. 1), 5.