

京大過去問 2009年 第2問

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Many of the most common things that we encounter in everyday life are also among the most elegant solutions in fitting form to function. (1)Thus the familiar paper clip has long been widely admired by architects and designers for being a graceful loop-within-a-loop spring that silently does its job. The sewing needle, with its sharp, elongated point balanced by its soft oval eye, is a classic example of opposites united in a manufactured product. But such things, being made of steel, are many times removed from the raw materials from which they begin. These are not things easily made from scratch by a single person. Small things made of wood are more organic, closer to nature and formable by an individual with little more than a sharp knife and a patient hand.

(2)My vote for the simplest object of all goes to one that is made of a single material, has a single part and is intended (at least originally) for a single purpose, from which it gets its name. This simple object is the toothpick. This humble tool, so familiar as to be generally unremarkable, can be made by an idle boy with a stick and a knife. Each example would bear the individuality of its maker and the uniqueness of its circumstances. But in the latter part of the 19th century, toothpick making — like virtually everything else — began to be mechanized, producing a product whose shape could be reliably replicated.

(3)Anthropologists believe, based on the existence of nearly 2-million-year-old fossil teeth bearing distinct grooves, that picking the teeth, one of the earliest uses of a tool, is mankind's oldest habit. The marks may have resulted from the repeated and prolonged use of grass stalks containing hard particles. With the development of civilization, toothpicks began to be deliberately fabricated from other materials. In ancient times, metallic toothpicks were used and shown off by privileged classes and provided the principal means of caring for one's teeth. Even in modern times, a gold or silver toothpick kept in a case in one's pocket or purse has been a constant companion to some of the more fastidious. The more common wooden toothpick, perhaps made from a broken branch, was an alternative to the metallic kind. The production of wooden toothpicks as a cottage industry dates from the 16th century.