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Seminar in Material Culture

American and New England Studies, Art History
Boston University
Fall 2008

AM/AH 867
Mondays 1-4
226 Bay State Road, Room 110

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This course introduces the theory and practice of the study of material culture, the physical stuff that is part of human life. Material culture includes everything we make and use, from food and clothing to art and buildings. We will read a wide range of contemporary scholarship on material culture from a range of disciplines, including anthropology, history, sociology, art and architectural history, and cultural studies. The course focuses particularly on American material culture and on material culture in the context of mass consumption, but places it in a larger context of international studies in material culture and material culture in all times and places.

Requirements

The primary requirement of the course is participation: doing the reading, coming to class, and participating in discussion; it will be worth 40% of your grade for the course. You will write short, informal weekly reaction papers to each set of readings, which you will post on a discussion board on the courseinfo website by Sunday night. These informal papers are not graded, but are required, and will help you fully engage in discussion. For the first several weeks you will also have four short assignments, due in class, in which you will be exploring different aspects of material culture. Each of these is worth 5% of your grade for the course. At the end of the semester, you will write a research paper on an object or a small group of related objects, which you will present to your colleagues in preliminary form in class December 1 or 8. A proposal and preliminary bibliography is due October 27. The final paper is due December 15. The paper project (including your proposal, bibliography, and presentation) is worth 40% of your grade for the course. For all assignments, you are required to follow the rules of style laid out in *The Chicago Manual of Style*, which has been ordered as a required book. It will tell you what you need to know about margins, spacing, footnotes, punctuation, etc.

Books

All readings required for this class are either in the required books below or in the readings available through the courseinfo web site. Any reading with only a short reference given in the week-by-week syllabus comes from a recommended book (and is also available online).

Required

- The Chicago Manual of Style, 15th Edition*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003.
- Ames, Kenneth. *Death in the Dining Room and Other Tales of Victorian Culture*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1992.
- Bushman, Richard. *The Refinement of America: Persons, Houses, Cities*. New York: Vintage, 1992.
- Deetz, James. *In Small Things Forgotten: The Archaeology of Early American Life*. New York: Anchor Books, 1996 (revised and expanded edition)
- Forty, Adrian. *Objects of Desire: Design and Society from Wedgwood to IBM*. New York: Thames and Hudson, 1992 (reprint edition).
- Gelber, Steven M. *Hobbies: Leisure and the Culture of Work in America*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1999.
- Lubar, Steven, and W. David Kingery, eds. *History From Things: Essays on Material Culture*. Washington: Smithsonian Institution, 1993.
- Molotch, Harvey. *Where Stuff Comes From*. New York: Routledge, 2003.

Recommended

- Amato, Ivan. *Stuff: The Materials the World is Made Of*. New York: Basic Books, 1997.
- Appadurai, Arjun ed. *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986.
- Attfield, Judy. *Wild Things: The Material Culture of Everyday Life*. London: Berg, 2000.
- Bronner, Simon. *Grasping Things: Folk Material Culture and Mass Society in America*. Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1986.
- de Grazia, Victoria, and Ellen Furlough, eds. *The Sex of Things: Gender and Consumption in Historical Perspective*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996.
- Franz, Kathleen. *Tinkering: Consumers Reinvent the Early Automobile*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005.
- Glassie, Henry. *Material Culture*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999.
- Graves-Brown, P.M., ed. *Matter, Materiality, and Modern Culture*. London: Routledge, 2000.
- Gregson, Nicky and Louise Crewe. *Second-Hand Cultures*. Oxford: Berg, 2003.
- Gutman, Marta, and Ning de Connick-Smith, eds., *Designing Modern Childhoods: History, Space, and the Material Culture of Childhood*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2008.
- Hebdige, Dick. *Hiding in the Light: On Images and Things*. London: Routledge, 1988.
- Hoadley, R. Bruce. *Understanding Wood: A Craftsman's Guide to Wood Technology*. Newtown, CT: The Taunton Press, 2000.
- Hillis, Ken, and Michael Petit, eds., *Everyday eBay: Culture, Collecting, and Desire*. New York: Routledge, 2006.

- Inness, Sherrie A., ed. *Kitchen Culture in America*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001.
- Kirkham, Pat, ed. *The Gendered Object*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1996.
- Margolin, Victor, and Patty Carroll, *Culture is Everywhere*. Munich: Prestel, 2002).
- Martinez, Katherine, and Kenneth Ames, eds. *The Material Culture of Gender/The Gender of Material Culture*. Winterthur, DE: Henry Francis DuPont Winterthur Museum, 1997.
- McDannell, Colleen. *Material Christianity: Religion and Popular Culture in America*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995.
- Meikle, Jeffrey. *American Plastic: A Cultural History*. New Brunswick: Rutgers, 1997.
- Moskowitz, Marina. *The Standard of Living: The Measure of the Middle Class in Modern America*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 2004.
- Petroski, Henry. *The Evolution of Useful Things*. New York: Vintage, 1992.
- Schlereth, Thomas J., ed. *Material Culture Studies in America*. Lanham, MD: Altamira Press, 1999
- Sharp, Leslie. *Bodies, Commodities, and Technology: Death, Mourning, and Scientific Desire in the Realm of Human Organ Transfers*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2007
- Sheehy, Colleen J. ed., *Cabinet of Curiosities: Mark Dion and the University as Installation*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006.
- Strasser, Susan. *Waste and Want: A Social History of Trash*. New York: Metropolitan Books, 1999.
- Veblen, Thorstein. *The Theory of the Leisure Class*. New York: Penguin, 1994 (1899).

Schedule of Course Meetings

Week 1: Sept. 8 **Introductions**

Week 2: Sept. 15 **What is Material Culture?**

Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, "Why We Need Things" in Lubar and Kingery

Henry Glassie, "Material Culture" in Glassie

P.M. Graves-Brown, "Introduction" in *Matter, Materiality, and Modern Culture*.

Jacques Macquet, "Objects as Instruments, Objects as Signs," in Lubar and Kingery

Jules Prown, "Mind in Matter: An Introduction to Material Culture Theory and Method"

Winterthur Portfolio, Vol. 17, No. 1. (Spring 1982), 1-19.

Dell Upton, "The City as Material Culture" in Yentsch and Beaudry, eds., *The Art and Mystery of Historical Archaeology* (Boca Raton: CRC Press, 1989)

Week 3: Sept. 22 **Form and Style**

Margaret Conkey and Christine Hastorf, "Introduction," in *The Uses of Style in Archaeology*

Margaret Conkey, "Experimenting with Style in Archaeology: Some Historical and Theoretical Issues" in *The Uses of Style in Archaeology*

James Deetz, *In Small Things Forgotten*

Jules Prown, "The Truth of Material Culture" in Lubar and Kingery

Rita P. Wright, "Technological Styles: Transforming a Natural Material Into a Cultural Object" in Lubar and Kingery

Assignment 1: Choose a simple object. Using Prown's "Mind in Matter" as a guide, follow Prown's steps of description, deduction, and speculation. Concentrate especially on description and deduction. Try to use all your senses in your engagement with the object.

Week 4: Sept. 29 **Materials**

Amato, "The Secret Architecture of Stuff" in *Stuff*.

Robert Friedel, "Some Matters of Substance" in Lubar and Kingery

Ettlinger, "Baking Soda" and "Phosphates" in *Twinkie, Deconstructed*

Hadley, "The Nature of Wood" in *Understanding Wood*

Jennifer Anderson, "Nature's Currency: The Atlantic Mahogany Trade and the Commodification of Nature in the Nineteenth Century," in *Early American Studies*, Spring 2004, 47-80.

Jeffrey L. Meikle, *American Plastic: A Cultural History*, Intro, Ch 1-3, 7

Assignment 2: Figure out what material or materials the object you used for assignment 1 is made of. Research this material's properties, source, production, and meanings. Speculate as to why this material was used for this object.

Week 5: Oct. 6 **Making Things**

Simon Bronner, "Grasping Things" in *Grasping Things*

Tim Ingold, "Making Culture and Weaving the World" in *Matter, Materiality, and Modern Culture*, 50-71

Adrian Forty, "Design and Mechanization" in *Objects of Desire*

Steven Gelber, "Section 3: Handicrafts," in *Hobbies*

Luce Giard, "Gesture Sequences" and "Rules of the Art" in de Certeau et. al, *The Practice of Everyday Life, Vol.2* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998)

Assignment 3: Find someone who makes something. Have that person teach you how. Interview the person about the process of making. How did they learn how to make this thing? Who did they learn from? How did their knowledge and skills change? What meaning does the act of making hold for them? What traces of the making are readable in the thing itself (how can you tell how it was made and how well)?

Week 6: Oct 14 (Tuesday imitating a Monday) **Design and Designers**

Judy Attfield, "The Meaning of Design: Things with Attitude" in *Wild Things: The Material Culture of Everyday Life*, 11-43.

David Pye, "The Six Requirements for Design," in Schlereth, ed., *Material Culture Studies in America*

Henry Petroski, "Form Follows Failure" and "From Pins to Paper Clips" in *The Evolution of Useful Things*

Adrian Forty, "Images of Progress" and "The First Industrial Designers" in *Objects of Desire*

Harvey Molotch, *Where Stuff Comes From*, chapters 1-4

Assignment 4: Choose a type of object (ideally the type used for assignment 1). Compare two or more different objects of that type. Analyze the designs of the objects in relation to function, cultural meanings, differentiation, and the market.

Week 7: Oct 20 **Selling Things**

Elaine Abelson, "The World of the Store," in *When Ladies Go A-Thieving* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989)

Jane Dusselier, "Bon Bons, Lemon Drops and Oh Henry! Bars" in Inness

Nicky Gregson and Louise Crewe, "Constituting Difference"

Paco Underhill, "The Sensual Shopper" in *Why We Buy* (New York: Touchstone, 1999)

Sharon Zukin, "Julia Learns to Shop" in *Point of Purchase: How Shopping Changed American Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2004)

Dick Hebdige, "Object as Image: The Italian Scooter Cycle" in Hebdige, *Hiding in the Light*

Week 8: Oct 27 **Using Things**

- Iain Borden, "Urban Compositions" in *Skateboarding, Space, and the City* (Oxford: Berg, 2001)
Kathleen Franz, "What Consumers Wanted" in *Tinkering*
Nicky Gregson and Louise Crewe, "Transformations"
Colleen McDannell, "Piety, Art, Fashion: The Religious Object" in *Material Christianity*
Ann Romines, "Putting Things in Order: The Domestic Aesthetic of Laura Ingalls Wilder's
Little House Books" in Martinez and Ames, eds., *The Gender of Material Culture*

Proposal due for final paper

Week 9: Nov. 3 **Collecting Things**

- Marjorie Akin, "Passionate Collection: The Formation of Private Collections" in W. David Kingery, ed., *Learning from Things: Method and Theory of Material Culture Study* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution, 1996)
Leora Auslander, "The Gendering of Consumer Practices in Nineteenth-Century France" in de Grazia and Furlough, eds., *The Sex of Things*
Nathan Scott Epley, "Of PEZ and Perfect Price: Sniping, Collecting Cultures, and Democracy on eBay" in Hillis and Petit, eds., *Everyday eBay*
Steven Gelber, "The Collectible Object" and "Collectors" in *Hobbies*
Victor Margolin, Culture is Everywhere: An Introduction to the Museum of Corn-temporary Art" in *Culture is Everywhere*
E. Bruce Robertson, "Curiosity Cabinets, Museums, and Universities," in Sheehy, ed., *Cabinet of Curiosities*
Zoe Trodd, "Reading eBay: Hidden Stores, Subjective Stories, and a People's History of the Archive," in Hillis and Petit, eds., *Everyday eBay*

Week 10: Nov 10 **Commodities and Consumer Culture**

- T.H. Breen, "Narratives of Commercial Life: Consumption, Ideology, and Community on the Eve of the American Revolution" *William and Mary Quarterly* 3rd Series, Vol. L (July 1993)
Igor Kopytoff, "The Cultural Biography of Things" in Appadurai, *The Social Life of Things*
Jon Lillie, "Immaterial Labor in the eBay Community: The Work of Consumption in the 'Network Society'" in Hillis and Petit, eds., *Everyday eBay*
Leslie Sharp, "Body Commodities: The Medical Value of the Human Body and its Parts" in *Bodies, Commodities, and Technology: Death, Mourning, and Scientific Desire in the Realm of Human Organ Transfers* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007)
Susan Strasser, "Having and Disposing in the New Consumer Culture" in *Waste and Want*
Thorstein Veblen, "Conspicuous Consumption"

Week 11: Nov 17 **Body/Self**

Richard Bushman, "Bodies and Minds" in *The Refinement of America*

Fred Davis, "Do Clothes Speak? What Makes them Fashion?" in *Fashion, Culture, and Identity*
(Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992)

Lauraine LeBlanc, "I'll Slap on My Lipstick and Then Kick Their Ass': Constructing
Femininity" in *Pretty in Punk: Girls' Gender Resistance in a Boys' Subculture* (New
Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1999)

Kathy Peiss, "Making Up, Making Over: Cosmetics, Consumer Culture, and Women's Identity"
in de Grazia and Furlough, eds., *The Sex of Things*.

Add another article on the body? Or possibly posture and power from Ames?

Week 12: Nov. 24 **Difference**

Kenneth Ames, "Death in the Dining Room" in *Death in the Dining Room*

Adrian Forty, "Differentiation in Design"

Rebecca Ginsburg, "The View from the Back Step: White Children Learn about Race in
Johannesburg's Suburban Homes" in Gutman and de Connick-Smith, eds., *Designing
Modern Childhoods*

Juliet Kinchin, "Interiors: Nineteenth-Century Essays on the 'Masculine' and the 'Feminine'
Room" in Kirkham, ed., *The Gendered Object*

Marina Moskowitz, "The Standard of Living" and "The Standard of Etiquette" in *The Standard
of Living*

Virginia Scharff, "Gender and Genius: The Auto Industry and Femininity" in Martinez and
Ames, eds., *The Gender of Material Culture*

Week 13: Dec. 1 **Student Presentations**

Week 14: Dec. 8 **Student Presentations**