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**instructor:** Ryan K. Smith  
**course title:** Topics in History: American Material Culture  
**institution:** Virginia Commonwealth University  
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HIST 691-901  
Topics in History: American Material Culture

Fall 2009, Thursdays 4:00-6:40pm  
Room 2132, Harris Hall

Instructor: Dr. Ryan K. Smith  
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What is "material culture?" In short, the term means all things created or modified by people - clothing, tools, furniture, works of art, books, buildings, and even landscapes, for example. So the study of American material culture is an attempt to learn about American society by examining its artifacts and architecture.

This may seem like a simple proposition, but it is not. For the bulk of American history has been written from literary sources rather than material sources - from the words left behind in letters, diaries, court records, newspapers, and other documents and books. And despite the richness of America's physical heritage, there may be good reason for this. Archaeologists, art historians, and others confronting artifacts have had to work hard in order to make non-literary artifacts speak.

Our class will explore this dilemma. Following a rough chronology of American history, we will consider representative topics from several related academic disciplines. We will also pay particular attention to the role of politics in the preservation and exhibition of material culture, and we will make a few excursions outside the classroom. Finally, true to time-honored traditions, each student will complete a substantial research project focusing on a particular artifact or landscape feature.

In the end, students will be better prepared for careers in public history and for historical research in general. And they may gain a new appreciation for flea markets and trash dumps.

Required books:

All the following books are on reserve in Cabell library on one-hour loan. Other reading assignments will be posted in .pdf format on Blackboard.

Richard L. Bushman, *The Refinement of America: Persons, Houses, Cities* (New York: Vintage, 1992)

Pauline K. Eversmann, *The Winterthur Guide to Recognizing Styles: American Decorative Arts from the 17th through the 19th Centuries* (Winterthur, Del.: Winterthur Museum, 2001)

Leland Ferguson, *Uncommon Ground: Archaeology and Early African America, 1650-1800* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2004)

Henry Glassie, *Folk Housing in Middle Virginia* (Knoxville: Univ. of Tennessee Press, 1975)

Jules David Prown and Kenneth Haltman, eds., *American Artifacts: Essays in Material Culture* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2000)

William Rathje and Cullen Murphy, *Rubbish!: The Archaeology of Garbage* (New York: HarperCollins, 2002)

*Recommended:* Henry Petroski, *The Evolution of Useful Things* (New York: Random House, 1992)

Assignments and grading:

Class participation, including on-time attendance and involvement in discussions, activities, and field trips, is essential. Other assignments include a paper on probate inventories (5 pages), two reading response papers (3 pages each), an object bibliography, and a final research paper (15-20 pages) with oral presentation. The percentage breakdown for the final grade will be:

|                        |                   |
|------------------------|-------------------|
| Class participation    | 25%               |
| Probate paper          | 15%               |
| Reading responses      | 10% (2 @ 5% each) |
| Object bibliography    | 5%                |
| Final research project | 45%               |

Attendance is mandatory at every class meeting. Students missing more than two class meetings will fail the course. All

assignments must be handed in to me in person, and those handed in late will lose one-half letter grade for each day late.

Academic Integrity:

All work in this class is pledged work under the "VCU Honor System," available online at <http://www.students.vcu.edu/rg/policies/honor.html>. Any cheating or plagiarism will result in failing the course.

Disabilities:

If you have a physical or learning disability, please notify me with appropriate documentation as soon as possible.

Class outline:

This is a rough outline, subject to change at any time.

**Week 1 (8/20) - Introduction**

Reading:

\* Verne E. Chatelaine, "A National Policy for Historic Sites and Monuments," (1934)

**Week 2 - (8/27) - The range and purpose of artifact research**

In-class roadshow; bring in an older object for discussion

Reading:

\* Jules David Prown and Kenneth Haltman, eds., *American Artifacts: Essays in Material Culture* (2000)

**Week 3 - (9/3) Theories and origins of the field**

Reading:

\* Henry Glassie, *Folk Housing in Middle Virginia* (1975)

**Week 4 - (9/10) Historical archaeology, race, and early America**

Visit by Matt Laird, James River Institute for Archaeology

Reading:

\* Leland Ferguson, *Uncommon Ground: Archaeology and Early African America, 1650-1800* (2004)

\* "The Slave Trade as a Commercial Enterprise in Richmond, Virginia," National Register of Historic Places, Multiple Property Documentation Form (2008)

## **Week 5 - (9/17) Ceramics, textiles, and production**

Due: Probate paper

Reading:

\* Adam Smith, Book I, Chapter 1 - "Of the Division of Labour" in [*An Inquiry Into the Nature and Causes of] The Wealth of Nations* (1776)

\* Chapter 7 "Cider" through Chapter 17 "Pottery" in *The Book of Commerce by Sea and Land* (Philadelphia: Uriah Hunt, 1837), pp. 31-58

\* Charlotte F. Speight and John Toki, Chapter 1 "An Introduction to Clay," Chapter 5 "Indigenous America - North America," Chapter 6 "Europe," and Chapter 7 "The United States" in *Hands in Clay: An Introduction to Ceramics* (Mountain View, Cal.: Mayfield Publishing Co., 1995), pp. 3-22, 102-38

\* Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, Chapter 8 "A Linen Tablecloth," in *The Age of Homespun: Objects and Stories in the Creation of an American Myth* (New York: Random House, 2001), pp. 277-305

## **Week 6 - (9/24) Art History: march of the styles**

Visit by Susan Rawles, Virginia Museum of Fine Arts

Reading:

\* Pauline K. Eversmann, *The Winterthur Guide to Recognizing Styles: American Decorative Arts from the 17th through the 19th Centuries* (2001)

\* Preface and Chapter 4 "The Artful Interior," by Marilyn Johnson, in Doreen Burke, ed., *In Pursuit of Beauty: Americans and the Aesthetic Movement* (New York: 1986), pp. 18-21, 110-41

\* Eleanor H. Gustafson "The Worsham-Rockefeller Rooms," *Antiques* (April 7, 2009):

<http://www.themagazineantiques.com/news-opinion/discovery/2009-04-07/the-worsham-rockefeller-rooms/>

## **Week 7 - (10/1) Meet your local curator/object research day/no class meeting**

Reading:

\* Richard L. Bushman, *The Refinement of America: Persons, Houses, Cities* (1992) first half

\* James Axtell, "The First Consumer Revolution" chapter 5 in *Beyond 1492* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), pp. 125-51

**Week 8 - (10/8) Gentility and consumerism**

Due: Object bibliography, and at least one reading response paper by now

Reading:

\* Richard L. Bushman, *The Refinement of America: Persons, Houses, Cities* (1992) last half

\* Ann Smart Martin, "Boundaries in the World of Shopping: Race, Class, and Gender in the Eighteenth-Century Virginia Store Trade," unpublished paper

**Week 9 - (10/15) Reading Day/landscape - no class meeting**

\* Dell Upton, "White and Black Landscapes in Eighteenth-Century Virginia," *Places* 2 (1984): 59-72

**Week 10 - (10/22) Religion and the material world**

Field trip to cathedral and synagogue

Reading:

\* James Deetz, Chapter 4 "Remember Me as You Pass By," in *In Small Things Forgotten: An Archaeology of Early American Life* (New York: Doubleday, 1996), pp. 89-124

\* Louis P. Nelson, "Sensing the Sacred: Anglican Material Religion in Early South Carolina," *Winterthur Portfolio* 41 (2007): 203-37

\* Ryan K. Smith "The Cross: Church Symbol and Contest in Nineteenth-Century America," *Church History* 70 (December 2001): 705-34

\* Steven H. Moffson, "Identity and Assimilation in Synagogue Architecture in Georgia, 1870-1920," in Alison K. Hoagland and Kenneth A. Breisch, eds., *Constructing Image, Identity, and Place: Perspectives in Vernacular Architecture IX* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2003), pp. 151-165

**Week 11 - (10/29) Fin-de-Siècle consumption and landscape**

Possible field trip

Friday 10/30 is last day to withdraw

Reading:

\* Kate Chopin, "A Pair of Silk Stockings" (1897)

\* Elizabeth A. Cohen, "Embellishing a Life of Labor: An Interpretation of the Material Culture of American Working-Class

Homes, 1885-1915" *Journal of American Culture* 3 (Winter 1980): 752-75

\* Selden Richardson, Chapter 5 "The New Architects" in *Built By Blacks: African American Architecture and Neighborhoods in Richmond, Virginia* (Richmond: Alliance to Conserve Old Richmond Neighborhoods, 2007), pp. 74-95

\* Kathy Edwards and Esmé Howard, "Monument Avenue: The Architecture of Consensus in the New South, 1890-1930," in Carter L. Hudgins and Elizabeth Collins Cromley, eds., *Shaping Communities: Perspectives in Vernacular Architecture VI* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1997), 92-110

## **Week 12 - (11/5) Modern tools**

Reading:

\* Nicholas J. Saunders, "The ironic 'culture of shells' in the Great War and beyond," in John Schofield, William Gray Johnson, and Colleen M. Beck, eds., *Matériel Culture: The Archaeology of Twentieth Century Conflicts* (New York: Routledge, 2002), pp. 22-40

\* Henry Petroski, Chapter 2 "Form Follows Failure," Chapter 4 "From Pins to Paper Clips," Chapter 10 "The Power of Precedent," and Chapter 11 "Closure Before Opening," in *The Evolution of Useful Things* (New York: Random House, 1992), pp. 22-33, 51-77, 171-208

\* Alison J. Clarke, "Tupperware: Product as Social Relation," in Ann Smart Martin and J. Ritchie Garrison, eds., *American Material Culture: The Shape of the Field* (1997), pp. 225-250

## **Week 13 - (11/12) An archaeology for today; final presentations**

Last day to turn in second reading response paper

Reading:

\* William Rathje and Cullen Murphy, *Rubbish!: The Archaeology of Garbage* (2002)

## **Week 14 - (11/19) Indians and museums; final presentations**

Reading:

\* Karen Coody Cooper, Chapter 6 "Demands for Return of Human Remains," in *Spirited Encounters: American Indians Protest Museum Policies and Practices* (Lanham, Md.: Altamira Press, 2008), pp. 85-104

**Week 15 - (11/26) Thanksgiving holiday - no class**

**Week 16 - (12/3) Last day of class; final presentations**

Final paper due on or before 5pm on Thursday, December 10, 2009