

**Northern Jewish Studies Partnership Research Workshop:  
The Study and Conceptualization of Material Objects  
25 June 2019**

A: Theoretical Background Readings for Workshop

1. Karen Harvey pp. 1-8 and 15;  
Karen Harvey, *History of Material Culture: A student's guide to approaching alternative sources*. Routledge 2009.  
For the full introduction see [here](#).
  
2. Hodder, pp. 119-124  
Ian Hodder, "The Interpretation of Documents and Material Culture", in *Collecting and Interpreting Qualitative Materials*, eds. Norman K. Denzin and Yvonna S. Lincoln. Sage Publications 2003.  
For the full paper see [here](#).
  
3. Richardson et al, only pp. 21-26  
Catherine Richardson, Tara Hamling and David Gaimster (eds.), *the Routledge Handbook of Material Culture in Early Modern Europe*.  
Routledge 2017.  
For the full introduction see [here](#).

B. Practical Reading

4. Sample Description of a Material Object: Amulet (SS and PSA).

C. Optional reading

5. Susan Pearce (ed.), *Researching Material Culture*. University of Leicester 2000.

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# Introduction

## Practical matters<sup>1</sup>

*Karen Harvey*

A cursory glance across the metres of book shelves on decorative art in bookstores and libraries, a visit to a museum, a trip to a historic building, or even a walk down your street, reveals a mass of data that would – were it not for its material form – be considered a gold mine of primary sources for historians. For some time, this mass of historical evidence was often overlooked or sidelined, considered not the proper raw materials of a historian. As a staple of historical training, material culture has generally been absent from most university history programmes. Increasingly, though, historians regard objects as a useful, even necessary, component of their study of the past. In this context, this book raises two central questions: ‘How can objects be used in history?’ and ‘What can objects offer the historian?’

These are deceptively straightforward questions that invite us to explore a series of substantial methodological and epistemological issues, concerning what we do and how we know. What do historians aim to achieve? How do they go about this? On what do they base their claims to knowledge about the past? In this Introduction I will begin the discussion of these issues, a discussion that continues through the essays that follow. In turn, I will examine (a) some of the important and well-established approaches to ‘material culture’, and their implications for historians, and (b) the opportunities and challenges of researching ‘material culture’ for historians, and the specific issues that arise when historians attend to material culture. The two appendices that follow this Introduction are designed as practical guides for those starting the process of researching and writing about material culture.

My aim in the Introduction is not to provide a comprehensive step-by-step ‘how to’ guide on the method historians should adopt in their analysis of objects – the essays that follow fulfil that role ably, and in their very detail and diversity demonstrate how the maturity of these approaches would render such a ‘how to’ piece superficial and reductive. Rather, this Introduction will provide a context for the essays that follow. Collectively, these essays insist that history is impoverished without attention to material culture, and one by one and in different ways they demonstrate the gains to be won. The book seeks to open up the discipline of history to new approaches, new sources, new interpretations and new knowledge about the past. As such, it is intended to serve as a guide to those increasing numbers of students of history needing and wanting to integrate material culture into

their study of the past. But, crucially, this book has a second ambition. Objects are valuable to historians, but historians have skills and knowledge that can enrich the study of material culture. In this Introduction, I will consider both what historians might learn from material culture and also what students of material culture might learn from the diversity of historians' approaches to objects.

### **Approaches to material culture**

As several of the contributors to this book make clear, historians are not the first to integrate objects into their research. Archaeologists, literary historians, art historians, sociologists, anthropologists – and others – have taken different approaches to objects, and historians have much to learn from these studies. To shape this brief discussion of work on material culture, and to raise issues of particular relevance to historians, I will introduce some basic differences in emphasis by adopting a distinction made by Bernard Herman, author of many studies of material culture. Herman makes a distinction between studies that are 'object-centred' and those that are 'object-driven'.

Object-centred projects tend to look at technological development, typologies, and the aesthetic qualities of taste and fashion.<sup>2</sup> Building on Herman's bi-partite model, we can usefully split this object-centred approach into two main forms. The first focuses closely on the physical attributes of an object, either with single objects (as often in decorative arts) or a series or group of objects (most notably in the assemblage finds or constructed series of archaeology). Here, there is a high premium on connoisseurial expertise, on the detailed knowledge about the material features of the object. The second kind of object-centred analysis is one rooted in an art historical approach, in which the focus moves from the object to what we might regard as the emotional or psychological dimensions of material culture. One example of such an approach is that given by Jules David Prown. His three-stage method is as follows: first, the researcher engages in precise *description*, focusing on the internal evidence of the object; second, the researcher engages in *deduction*, exploring the possible connections between object and people based on both intellectual but also emotional responses; third, the researcher engages in *speculation*, using external evidence but also 'creative imagining' to understand why the object is the way it is, or provokes the way it provokes.<sup>3</sup>

Studies of material culture that are 'object-driven' regard 'objects as evidence of other complex social relationships'.<sup>4</sup> Working in this vein, Herman seeks to 'reconnect objects to their historical contexts' by undertaking 'the construction of collective biographies of objects and sites through a process of thick description'.<sup>5</sup> Using many written sources, as well as material ones, Herman peels off past layers of meaning around objects, and in doing so finds out things about the people that made, used and lived with those objects. Already we can observe the complex nature of work on material culture, because Prown's method edges towards Herman's 'object-driven' approaches. While the emphasis on thick description – a reference to the method of reading culture developed by the anthropologist Clifford Geertz<sup>6</sup> – links to some extent with Prown's attention to close and repeated



engagement of the researcher with the object and its meanings, though, Herman's emphasis is more on people and lives.

Another scholar working in the field of material culture studies – Henry Glassie – moves away from written sources. In his characteristically poetic style, the American 'folk historian' reminds his readers of the gain to be had from studying things as well as words:

studies focused on words, whether written or spoken, omit whole spheres of experience that are clumsily framed in language but gracefully shaped into artifacts. We miss more than most people in recent times, and everyone in the most ancient days, when we restrict historical research to verbal documents. We miss the wordless experience of all people, rich or poor, near or far.<sup>7</sup>

Glassie's stress on wordless experience is a considerable challenge for history, a discipline that draws predominantly on written documents. But while his work examines the intricate details of form, style, construction and materials, Glassie moves repeatedly away from the object, to context. For Glassie, objects 'are texts, sets of parts, to which meaning is brought by locating them in contexts'.<sup>8</sup>

Though different, the statements of Herman and Glassie share a concern with context, people and experience. In this they are characteristic of the field of 'material culture studies', particularly prominent and well developed in North America. Part of the distinctiveness of this field is its very interdisciplinarity: Ann Smart Martin, another important scholar in this area, has remarked on the diverse roots of this blended field: from anthropology it has garnered that material culture 'expresses and mediates human and social relationships', from social history it has inherited an interest in the non-elite, and from art history and the decorative arts, the field has developed close attention to aesthetics.<sup>9</sup> In addition to these foci, practitioners in the field adopt a rather specific definition of material culture. According to Martin, objects are a text (in and through which meanings are constructed, and power is created and maintained), and this text has 'its own grammar and vocabulary'.<sup>10</sup> It is important to note what scholars mean by the term 'material culture'. Unlike 'object' or 'artefact', 'material culture' encapsulates not just the physical attributes of an object, but the myriad and shifting contexts through which it acquires meaning. Material culture is not simply objects that people make, use and throw away; it is an integral part of – and indeed shapes – human experience. For historians, there are at least two important and related implications of these definitions of and approaches to material culture: first, material culture is a source type that demands new research practices and skills of the historian; second, objects are active and autonomous, not simply reflective.

All sources need to be handled with appropriate research skills. Objects are no different, and for historians (commonly trained in using written documents), the necessary re-tooling can be substantial. Several scholars have described the rather complex nature of objects as sources. As W. David Kingery has explained:

No one denies the importance of things, but learning from them requires rather more attention than reading texts. The grammar of things is related to, but more

complex and difficult to decipher than, the grammar of words. Artifacts are tools as well as signals, signs, and symbols. Their use and functions are multiple and intertwined. Much of their meaning is subliminal and unconscious. Some authors have talked about reading objects as texts, but objects must also be read as myths and as poetry.<sup>11</sup>

Such insistence on the multi-faceted nature of material culture, and thus on the necessary range of approaches to be adopted by the researcher, is shared by many others. A study by the UK archaeologist Christopher Tilley – *Metaphor and Material Culture* (1999) – for example, insists on the role of metaphor in people's understanding of the physical world, explaining that metaphor arises out of 'inherent problems in the precise relationship between a world of words and a world of things, events and actions'.<sup>12</sup> Metaphor is inextricably connected to things, then, with (in the case of Yekuana baskets in the Amazon), 'metaphorical meanings of designs ... materially present *in* the designs'.<sup>13</sup> Yet researching metaphor takes us into the realm of the 'imaginative faculties ... literature ... poetry ... fiction ... emotion and subjectivity', areas deemed 'fundamentally opposed to facts' and to 'a disinterested and objective understanding'. Tilley's impassioned call for social scientists to enter this realm is wise counsel for historians: 'metaphors provide the basis for an interpretative understanding of the world, the goal of the historical and social sciences'.<sup>14</sup> Not all those researching material culture share Tilley's emphasis on metaphor. John Dixon Hunt has questioned whether objects can ever function as metaphors in quite the same way as words, and instead suggests that objects should be regarded as signs that have been encoded, and must then be decoded by researchers.<sup>15</sup> These are significant differences, to be sure. But whether operating as metaphor, sign, symbol or tool – or all of these – the student or researcher needs to be equipped with the appropriate skills to work on such sources.

Arguably it is the 'connoisseurial' skills often deployed when studying material culture that might appear most foreign to historians, particularly in cases of 'art' objects. In Prown's art historical method, the emphasis is on the meaning of the material detail of the object and as such the connoisseurial aspect is given a greater emphasis than when a historian might analyse a written source. Indeed, connoisseurial analyses sit uneasily in the discipline of history, one of the humanities and social sciences rather than the arts, and one that is not object-centred. Historians' training does not predispose them to place aesthetic forms of evidence centre stage. These aesthetic features are certainly regarded as aspects of a source type that need to be acknowledged, but historians then tend to move on to the matter of what the content of the source can tell us about the topic in hand. Yet aesthetic features can serve as illuminating evidence for historians, in particular articulating the often unspoken beliefs and assumptions of a society. This is demonstrated in this book by Andrew Morrall's essay on sixteenth-century Northern European ornament, which takes the latter out of 'its traditional place within art history, ... to be understood rather as a potentially important branch of social experience'.<sup>16</sup>

The claim that objects are autonomous and active, rather than merely reflective, is another central tenet of many scholars working under the umbrella of 'material

culture studies', as it also is in many 'object-centred' disciplines.<sup>17</sup> This is a more substantial issue than that concerning the relative 'primacy of objects over other documents', a point of debate that has arisen elsewhere in discussions about material culture.<sup>18</sup> The first editorial of the *Journal of Material Culture* (1996) – a leading UK journal in this field – for example, declared that objects were not conduits of information (about the past or anything else) but possessed autonomy: 'Objects tend to be meaningful, rather than merely communicate meaning'.<sup>19</sup> These points are crucial to understanding the challenges of incorporating material culture into history as a discipline. Objects are not simply cultural receptacles that acquire meanings which can then be unearthed and read by the student or researcher. Through their very materiality – their shape, function, decoration, and so on – they have a role to play in creating and shaping experiences, identities and relationships. As Matthew Cochran and Mary Beaudry put it, paraphrasing the position of anthropological material culture studies in the United Kingdom, material culture is 'a potentially active agent in social life'.<sup>20</sup> Cochran and Beaudry go on to tease out the implications of this position in the work of historical archaeologists: 'By acknowledging the active role of objects in everyday life, historical archaeologists avoid the limitations of rigid classificatory schema that segregate objects from people.'<sup>21</sup>

Such a view of objects as active, and the resultant re-balancing of our view of the respective roles of people and things, is particularly important and perhaps contentious for historians. Arguably, it runs counter to the way that historians are invariably trained to view their primary materials: as 'documents', examined from a critical distance, and serving as 'sources' of information about people in the past. By contrast, those scholars who have devised robust methodologies for interpreting objects emphasize that objects are not documents in any simple way. Taking on board these points with regard to objects might lead historians to reassess their view of written documents, seeing them rather more as material objects themselves, perhaps, shaped by materials, design and aesthetics. Historians might even regard written documents as just one available set in a suite of others, rather than the principal source. As Dan Hicks and Mary Beaudry remark in their discussion of historical archaeology, 'written sources represent simply another, albeit distinctive, form of material culture rather than a revolutionary change in the human past'.<sup>22</sup> John Moreland has urged both historians and archaeologists to recognize how people in the past constructed power, identity and social practice out of objects and words, rather than viewing objects and texts as 'simply evidence *about* the past'.<sup>23</sup> Yet there is a further and more substantial issue here, one concerning human agency. There is much theoretical work on human agency, users and things.<sup>24</sup> Interested in people's past lives and experiences, historians are perhaps naturally inclined to emphasize the role of people in making those lives. Yet granting objects agency and power invites a different view of how lives are shaped. In this book, Marina Moskowitz instructs us to acknowledge the geographical, environmental and human impacts on landscape, as well as the interactions between them. Indeed, landscape is a particular kind of material culture, not produced or made in the same way as buildings, spoons or petticoats. Elsewhere in this book, though, a different relationship between people and things is imagined. Frank Dikötter's case study of

modern China seeks to underline the ways in which Chinese men and women shaped the uses and meanings of foreign objects. In so doing, this essay rethinks historical arguments concerning the interrelations of globalization and modernity: Western modernity did not wash over Chinese people, dampening indigenous tradition; instead the Chinese actively appropriated modern exports. For historians working on material culture, the agency of material objects is a point of lively debate.

Scholars differ in how they define and describe the kind of source that objects are, and also in the role that objects play in human society. Yet there is an important commonality in all the statements reproduced so far: an emphasis on meaning, on the complex ways in which this is embedded in an object and/or its context, and on the role of the researcher to detect and decipher these meanings. This is crucially important in recognizing the challenges of material culture for historians. Prown's definition of material culture, for example, brings to the fore this emphasis on meanings:

Material culture is just what it says it is – namely, the manifestations of culture through material productions. And the study of material culture is the study of material to understand culture, to discover the beliefs – the values, ideas, attitudes, and assumptions – of a particular community or society at a given time. The underlying premise is that human-made objects reflect, consciously or unconsciously, directly or indirectly, the beliefs of the individuals who commissioned, fabricated, purchased, or used them and, by extension, the beliefs of the larger society to which these individuals belonged. Material culture is thus an object-based branch of cultural anthropology or cultural history.<sup>25</sup>

With such a definition of material culture, it is little surprise that the latter two stages of Prown's methodology stress the extent of discovery and understanding on the part of the researcher, what we might view as a large space of interpretation between the object and the scholar. This emphasis on interpretation is common. Indeed, Hunt regards objects as offering unique attractions in this regard: 'the object appeals because within its sign is coded a richer range of meanings. It allows us more opportunities to perform as historians.'<sup>26</sup> Objects are particular kinds of sources, that might be agents as well as documents, and they demand that we acquire appropriate skills to understand them. But objects also offer an exciting opportunity for those interested in the past, because they allow the historian space to engage creatively with new sources in new ways, detecting and reconstructing objects' roles and meanings. They make the job of the historian first and foremost one of interpretation.

The discipline of history was perhaps once an inhospitable home for material culture studies. If history has been predominantly concerned with finding out what happened when and why, then studies of the meanings of objects might seem marginal to the central endeavour. History is increasingly interdisciplinary, though, and some historians are – and have long been – open to different approaches. Yet while the historical study of material culture has certainly been a growth area in



recent years,<sup>27</sup> Adrienne Hood has detected a recent backtracking and a notable absence of work by historians on objects.<sup>28</sup> Such an absence is in part a result of historians' training in written documents. But it also reflects (especially in the UK, perhaps, where historiographical approaches to material culture spring more from social history than from anthropology or ethnography) the socio-economic-inflected approach of the discipline. Material culture certainly chimes with cultural history, a now well-established element of the discipline, but it is not of universal appeal to all historians. Concerns about the cultural emphasis in historians' work on objects have been expressed by Richard Grassby, for example, who bemoans what he sees as too great an emphasis on the 'symbolic characteristics of objects' and 'the cultural interpretation of material life'. He calls for historians to 'test' the inferences made from objects against written documents, and to 'supplement' documentary evidence with archaeological finds; this, he argues, will enable historians to reconstruct a culture from evidence of people's own 'statements of intention' and people's 'actual behaviour'.<sup>29</sup> Here we have a rather different assessment of the nature and value of objects as sources than found in material culture studies, one that is doubtful about the self-sufficiency of objects as sources, and inclined to see them as enhancing findings from elsewhere.

It is instructive to reflect on such doubts, but to do this we must consider what it is that unites historians. Being wise to the concerns at the core of an academic discipline allows us to be self-reflective about the questions we are asking, and also those questions we are not asking. History is not at heart an 'object-centred' discipline. Guides to the object-centred analysis of material culture as historical texts are useful, but the contributions to this volume suggest that historians will rarely wish to place objects centre stage in quite this manner. While this does not mean paying any less attention to the 'thingness of the thing', it does mean using the results of this enquiry in subtly different ways.<sup>30</sup> In other words, historians are not much interested in things or their thingness for their own sake, but as routes to past experience. To reconcile these basic concerns with the study of objects, for material culture to be integrated securely into historical studies, we need to develop approaches that draw on and complement history's status as both a social science and a humanities discipline. We need to attend to how the study of material culture can satisfy social scientific demands for typicality and representativeness, while also reflecting the complex fabric of social relationships and meanings.

In fact, while Grassby rightly detects a cultural emphasis in some historical work on objects,<sup>31</sup> it is important that we hold on to the range of approaches possible when historians work on or with material culture. Certainly in studies of early American material culture, this range has been ever present: as Martin writes, 'At the heart of the undertaking, in all its diverse forms and thrusts, are relationships between human beings and the material world involving the use of things to mediate social relations and cultural behaviour.'<sup>32</sup> Attention to the material stuff and associated practices of everyday life – notable in archaeology and anthropology, for example – shows how the study of material culture facilitates a focus on social lives and experiences. And it is here that material culture can appeal to a broad constituency in history. Like many disciplines, history has been transformed by the

‘cultural turn’, with its emphasis on the role of language in shaping experiences. Historians have been exploring how their long-standing attention to the social might be reconfigured, restored or revived in this new landscape.<sup>33</sup> Significantly, historians are not alone in this concern – a ‘refocusing upon the material dimensions of social life’ has been noted across the arts, humanities and social sciences.<sup>34</sup> In history, integrating meaning and practice is just one way that we might conceive of this project.<sup>35</sup> And, as in other disciplines, material culture provides historians with a superb opportunity to sustain a focus on integrated social and cultural practice.

While a discipline may have a core, it will also feature variety, interdisciplinarity and areas of work that are in some tension with one another. When scholars work on material culture, the variety within disciplines – and also the connections between them – becomes plain. As a result, it can be difficult to distinguish between disciplinary approaches to material culture. Yet this is a feature of the field to be celebrated, not beaten down by oversimplified categories. As Lubar and Kingery cautioned readers in *History from Things* (1993), we need to be ‘wary of discipline-oriented overviews’; the reality of academic work in this field happily resists easy compartmentalization.<sup>36</sup> The contributors to this collection are all historians of one form or another.<sup>37</sup> And yet, Helen Berry’s piece on glass was forged through conversations with archaeologists, Anne Laurence’s work on buildings was influenced by collaboration with art historians and TV producers, Andrew Morrall’s essay on decoration explicitly employs an art historical method, while Marina Moskowitz’s contribution on landscape is rooted firmly in the field of cultural landscape studies. A historian’s study will always have particular emphases. These essays make palpable the range of approaches historians might take to material culture, whether object-centred or object-driven, and with a greater or lesser emphasis on cultural meaning or social practice. The volume demonstrates that this range of approaches to material culture can be accommodated within (but also transform) a predominantly text-based view of the past. Authors draw on the distinctive characteristics of the historical discipline, notably stressing context, a range of documents and the agency of social actors, but they simultaneously put into practice approaches and techniques garnered from other disciplines. The result is a collection of blended approaches which resist categorization as cultural or social histories, and which demonstrate that historians have much to gain from the study of material culture. As I now want to discuss, these essays show, too, that historians have a great deal to offer the wider field of material culture studies.

### **History and material culture**

While certainly not a universally accepted aspect of the discipline of history, material culture has received attention from historians for some time. In this section, it is not my intention to provide a comprehensive review of the many works by historians that use or research material culture.<sup>38</sup> Instead, I want to convey the breadth of this work, along with its roots in a socio-economic discipline. We must begin with the history of consumption. Historians’ interest in objects has often been one

### ***The process of research***

Each of the chapters that follow can be examined for its research process. Berry, for example, moves from general context to local context (Newcastle), from documentary sources to objects (style, materials, decoration), and from the spatial and material context to the ritual context. In the case of each essay, though, the process as it is outlined in the narrative might depart from the process of research as it was carried out. Here I will provide a very brief outline of a research process that historians might follow in studying material culture.<sup>63</sup> Note that this does not amount to a methodological position or analytical framework; these complex issues are dealt with elsewhere in this book. What follows are basic questions that a student may wish to bear in mind in their research, questions that I and my students have found useful. While a study should go through each stage at some point, it is important to remember that the order of the steps might vary, and (as with all research processes) there will be times when we need to return to an earlier stage in the light of new findings. This three-step model is intended as a very simple guide. It omits many steps that some historians would stress, some mentioned above (for example, the modern context in which the object now finds itself) and other discussed in the essays that follow (for example, the importance of tracing the life of an object from production to consumption). But it is based on years of teaching very able history undergraduates as they embark on their first attempts to study material culture.

- 1 We should attempt a description of the object itself, its physical attributes. Assess what the object is made of, how it was made and (of course) when; production methods and manufacture, materials, size, weight, design, style, decoration and date are some of the key issues to address here, though different forms of material culture will require different questions. If possible, find out how much such an item would cost for contemporaries.
- 2 We can place the object in a historical context, primarily by referring to other evidence. Here we can explore who owned this (or similar) objects, when, and what they were used for. Some of this can also be gleaned from handling or experiencing the objects themselves, an important part of the research process, and to be undertaken if possible. Knowledge about the physical attributes of an object, combined with external information, should help us understand how it was used.
- 3 Finally, we can explore more fully the place of the object (or its type) in the socio-cultural context, perhaps including 'documentary' and 'imaginative' written documents, as well as visual references. At this stage, and indeed throughout, the researcher will continue to engage with and reflect on the material nature of the object.

### ***Using museum, gallery or other collections***<sup>64</sup>

One of the daunting features of material culture for history students can be the need to enter new spaces. Many students use objects in museum, gallery and other

example) an indexed section on 'Material Culture and Daily Life'. There is also an advanced search option.

The Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge, UK

<http://www.fitzmuseum.cam.ac.uk/collections/>

From where you can search the collections, or browse the collections, for example in the categories of 'Applied Arts' or 'Paintings, Drawings and Prints'.

The Bridgeman Art Library

<http://www.bridgeman.co.uk/>

This is a massive collection of 'cultural and historical art images', available online, representing museums, galleries and artists from all over the world.

Digital Library for the Decorative Arts & Material Culture, University of Wisconsin-Madison

<http://decorativearts.library.wisc.edu/>

A rich source of documents, images and other resources relating to (mainly) American material culture.

## Notes

- 1 For discussing the issues that follow I would like to thank audiences at ASECS 2008, colleagues at the Victoria and Albert Museum (in particular Glenn Adamson and Angela McShane) and also at Museums Sheffield, and the many students on my further and special subjects at the University of Sheffield from 2003 to 2008. I also wish to thank Helen Berry, Mike Braddick, Natasha Glaisyer, Anne Laurence, Ann Smart Martin, Andrew Morrall, Giorgio Riello and Rosemary Sweet for their comments on this chapter. I thank Maxine Berg, Elizabeth Buettner and an anonymous reader for their valuable comments on the book.
- 2 Bernard L. Herman, *The Stolen House* (Charlottesville and London: University of Press of Virginia, 1992), pp. 11, 4.
- 3 Jules David Prown, 'Mind in Matter: An Introduction to Material Culture Theory and Method', *Winterthur Portfolio*, 17, 1 (Spring 1982), pp. 7–10. Republished in Jules David Prown, *Art as Evidence: Writings on Art and Material Culture* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2001).
- 4 Herman, *Stolen House*, pp. 11, 4.
- 5 *Ibid.*, p. 7.
- 6 Clifford Geertz, 'Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture', *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* (1973), pp. 3–30.
- 7 Henry Glassie, *Material Culture* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1999), p. 44.
- 8 *Ibid.*, p. 47.
- 9 Ann Smart Martin, 'Shaping the Field: The Multidisciplinary Perspectives of Material Culture', in Ann Smart Martin and J. Ritchie Garrison (eds), *American Material Culture: the Shape of the Field* (1997), *passim*, quote at p. 4.
- 10 *Ibid.*, p. 3. A similar point was made by William B. Heseltine in 'The Challenge of the Artifact', in Schlereth (ed.), *Material Culture Studies in America* (1982), pp. 93–100, where he argued for a major difference between object and literary source, calling for a specific method for extracting meaning from objects for historians.
- 11 W. David Kingery, 'Introduction', in W. David Kingery (ed.), *Learning from Things:*



- Method and Theory of Material Culture Studies* (Washington and London: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1996), p. 1.
- 12 Christopher Tilley, *Metaphor and Material Culture* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999), p. 6.
  - 13 *Ibid.*, p. 72.
  - 14 *Ibid.*, p. 4.
  - 15 John Dixon Hunt, 'The Sign of the Object', in Steven Lubar and W. David Kingery (eds), *History from Things: Essays on Material Culture* (Washington and London: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1993), p. 297.
  - 16 Andrew Morrall, 'Ornament as Evidence', Chapter 2 in this book, p. 47.
  - 17 There are a number of important journals in this field, including *Winterthur Portfolio*, published by the University of Chicago Press on behalf of the Henry Francis du Pont Winterthur Museum, United States, and the *Journal of Material Culture*, published by Sage. There are also many other specialist journals – for example, on silver, textiles and glass.
  - 18 Quote from Hunt, reporting the conference from which his essay arose. Hunt, 'Sign of the Object', p. 294.
  - 19 'Editorial' by Daniel Miller and Christopher Tilley, *Journal of Material Culture*, 1 (March 1996), p. 8. An important collection of articles also to emerge from the Material Culture Group at University College London in the UK is Victor Buchli's (ed.), *The Material Culture Reader* (Oxford and New York: Berg, 2002).
  - 20 Matthew D. Cochran and Mary C. Beaudry, 'Material Culture Studies and Historical Archaeology', in Dan Hicks and Mary C. Beaudry (eds), *The Cambridge Companion to Historical Archaeology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), p. 195.
  - 21 Cochran and Beaudry, 'Material Culture Studies', p. 203.
  - 22 Dan Hicks and Mary C. Beaudry, 'Introduction: The Place of Historical Archaeology', in Hicks and Beaudry (eds), *Cambridge Companion to Historical Archaeology*, p. 2.
  - 23 John Moreland, *Archaeology and Text* (2001; Duckworth: London, 2007), p. 119 and *passim*.
  - 24 Michel de Certeau, for example, focused on the creative practices through which non-elites (or 'common people') operate within an inherited dominant culture, appropriating aspects of that culture, exercising everyday agency to the point of an 'antidiscipline'. Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, transl. Steven Randall (1974; Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), p. v and *passim*.
  - 25 Jules David Prown, 'The Truth of Material Culture: History or Fiction?', in Lubar and Kingery (eds), *History from Things*, p. 1.
  - 26 Hunt, 'Sign of the Object', p. 298.
  - 27 The world-renowned postgraduate programmes at the Winterthur Museum, BARD Graduate Center and the Victoria and Albert Museum/Royal College of Art (the latter two both represented among the contributors here) are well established, though new courses are being developed rapidly. New centres are also being set up: the 'Chinese Material Culture Research Institute' at Nanjing University, China, and the 'Material Culture Institute' at University of Alberta, Canada, are indicative of a growing global academic interest.
  - 28 Adrienne D. Hood, 'Material Culture: The Object', in Sarah Barber and Corinna Peniston-Bird (eds) *History Beyond the Text: A Student's Guide to Approaching Alternative Sources* (New York and London: Routledge, 2008).
  - 29 Richard Grassby, 'Material Culture and Cultural History', *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, 35, 4 (Spring 2005), pp. 597, 601, 603.
  - 30 Hood, 'Material Culture', *passim*.
  - 31 The introduction to a recent collection also takes a culturalist approach. See Jennie Batchelor and Cora Kaplan (eds), *Women and Material Culture, 1660–1830* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), pp. 1–8. It is worth noting that not all the essays adopt such an approach, though. Barbara Burman and Jonathan White's 'Fanny's Pockets: Cotton,

- Consumption and Domestic Economy, 1780–1850’, pp. 31–51, insists on the contribution of the essay to social history.
- 32 Ann Smart Martin, ‘Material Things and Cultural Meanings: Notes on the Study of Early American Material Culture’, *The William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd Series, 53, 1 (January 1996), p. 7.
  - 33 This issue provides the focus for Victoria E. Bonnell and Lynn Hunt’s (eds), *Beyond the Cultural Turn. New Directions in the Study of Society and Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999). A useful review of these issues is Thomas Welskopp, ‘Social History’, in Stefan Berger, Heiko Feldner and Kevin Passmore (eds), *Writing History: Theory and Practice* (London: Hodder Arnold, 2003), pp. 203–22.
  - 34 Hicks and Beaudry, ‘Introduction’, p. 6.
  - 35 For a more detailed discussion of these issues, see Karen Harvey, *Reading Sex in the Eighteenth Century: Bodies and Gender in English Erotic Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), pp. 1–3; Karen Harvey, ‘Introduction’, in Karen Harvey (ed.) *The Kiss in History* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005), pp. 1–5.
  - 36 Steven Lubar and W. David Kingery, ‘Introduction’, in Lubar and Kingery (eds), *History from Things*, pp. xi, xvii.
  - 37 All except one of the contributors to this book either trained at postgraduate level in history and/or are now teaching in a department of history.
  - 38 There are other works that provide this kind of survey – for example, Hood’s ‘Material Culture’ in particular outlines an array of possible approaches, and wisely advises that ‘the important thing is to articulate it clearly and apply it rigorously’.
  - 39 Key works include Mark Overton, Jane Whittle, Darron Dean and Andrew Hann, *Production and Consumption in English Households, 1600–1750* (London: Routledge, 2004); Carole Shammas, *The Pre-Industrial Consumer in England and America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990); and Lorna Weatherill, *Consumer Behaviour and Material Culture in Britain, 1660–1760* (London: Routledge, 1988).
  - 40 The landmark work is Neil McKendrick, John Brewer and J.H. Plumb, *The Birth of a Consumer Society: The Commercialisation of Eighteenth-Century England* (London: Europa, 1982). But also see the essays in the three volumes: John Brewer and Roy Porter (eds), *Consumption and the World of Goods* (London: Routledge, 1993); Ann Bermingham and John Brewer (eds), *The Consumption of Culture, 1600–1800: Image, Object, Text* (London: Routledge, 1995); and John Brewer and Susan Staves (eds), *Early Modern Conceptions of Property* (London: Routledge, 1995). An important response to this attention to consumption is Sara Pennell, ‘Consumption and Consumerism in Early Modern England’, *Historical Journal*, 42, 2 (1999), pp. 549–64.
  - 41 A counterpoint to this latter emphasis is provided by Peter King’s ‘Pauper Inventories and the Material Lives of the Poor in the Eighteenth and Early Nineteenth Centuries’, in Tim Hitchcock, Peter King and Pamela Sharpe (eds), *Chronicling Poverty: The Voices and Strategies of the English Poor, 1640–1840* (London: Longman, 1997), pp. 155–91. See also John Styles, *The Dress of the People: Everyday Fashion in Eighteenth-Century England* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2007).
  - 42 Glassie notes that the word ‘goods’ instead of ‘artefacts’ reflects a focus on commodities and possessions, rather than the act of production by artisans and workers. See Glassie, *Material Culture*, p. 77.
  - 43 Matthew Johnson, ‘Archaeologies of Authority’, in *An Archaeology of Capitalism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996), p. 179.
  - 44 Igor Kopytoff, ‘The Cultural Biography of Things: Commoditization as a Process’ in Arjun Appadurai (ed.), *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective* (1986; Cambridge, New York, Oakleigh: Cambridge University Press, 1992), p. 68.
  - 45 Karin Dannehl, ‘Object Biographies: From Production to Consumption’, Chapter 6 in this book, p. 121.
  - 46 See Elizabeth B. Wood, ‘Pots and Pans History: Relating Manuscripts and Printed

- 59 Dannehl, 'Object Biographies: From Production to Consumption', Chapter 6 in this book, p. 67.
- 60 Prown, *Art as Evidence*, p. 236.
- 61 *Ibid.*, p. 239.
- 62 See, for example, Peter Burke's (ed.), *New Perspectives on Historical Writing* (1991; Cambridge: Polity Press, 2nd edn, 2001); Ludmilla Jordanova's *History in Practice* (2000; London: Arnold, 2006); and John Tosh, *The Pursuit of History: Aims, Methods and New Directions in the Study of Modern History* (1984; Harlow: Longman, 2nd edn, 1991).
- 63 These steps are reproduced in the short film, *Studying Material Culture for Historians* (written by Karen Harvey, directed by Graham McElearney, University of Sheffield, 2007). This film was made as part of a University of Sheffield Learning and Teaching Development Grant Project, titled 'Using Museum and Gallery Collections in History Teaching' (2006–08). The film is designed to introduce advanced history students to artefacts, museums, curators and a 'material culture' approach to the past.
- 64 For useful comments from a curatorial perspective on history students entering museums, see Hood, 'Material Culture'.

# 4

## The Interpretation of Documents and Material Culture

Ian Hodder

◆ This chapter is concerned with the interpretation of mute evidence—that is, with written texts and artifacts. Such evidence, unlike the spoken word, endures physically and thus can be separated across space and time from its author, producer, or user. Material traces thus often have to be interpreted without the benefit of indigenous commentary. There is often no possibility of interaction with spoken emic “insider” as opposed to etic “outsider” perspectives. Even when such interaction is possible, actors often seem curiously inarticulate about the reasons they dress in particular ways, choose particular pottery designs, or discard dung in particular locations. Material traces and residues thus pose special problems for qualitative research. The main disciplines that have tried to develop appropriate theory and method are history, art history, archaeology, anthropology, sociology, cognitive psychology, technology, and modern material culture studies, and it is from this range of disciplines that my account is drawn.

### ◆ Written Documents and Records

Lincoln and Guba (1985, p. 277) distinguish documents and records on the basis of whether the text was prepared to attest to some formal

transaction. Thus records include marriage certificates, driving licenses, building contracts, and banking statements. Documents, on the other hand, are prepared for personal rather than official reasons and include diaries, memos, letters, field notes, and so on. In fact, the two terms are often used interchangeably, although the distinction is an important one and has some parallels with the distinction between writing and speech, to be discussed below. Documents, closer to speech, require more contextualized interpretation. Records, on the other hand, may have local uses that become very distant from officially sanctioned meanings. Documents involve a personal technology, and records a full state technology of power. The distinction is also relevant for qualitative research, in that researchers may often be able to get access to documents, whereas access to records may be restricted by laws regarding privacy, confidentiality, and anonymity.

Despite the utility of the distinction between documents and records, my concern here is more the problems of interpretation of written texts of all kinds. Such texts are of importance for qualitative research because, in general terms, access can be easy and low cost, because the information provided may differ from and may not be available in spoken form, and because texts endure and thus give historical insight.

It has often been assumed, for example, in the archaeology of historical periods, that written texts provide a “truer” indication of original meanings than do other types of evidence (to be considered below). Indeed, Western social science has long privileged the spoken over the written and the written over the nonverbal (Derrida, 1978). Somehow it is assumed that words get us closer to minds. But as Derrida has shown, meaning does not reside in a text but in the writing and reading of it. As the text is reread in different contexts it is given new meanings, often contradictory and always socially embedded. Thus there is no “original” or “true” meaning of a text outside specific historical contexts. Historical archaeologists have come to accept that historical documents and records give not a better but simply a different picture from that provided by artifacts and architecture. Texts can be used alongside other forms of evidence so that the particular biases of each can be understood and compared.

Equally, different types of text have to be understood in the contexts of their conditions of production and reading. For example, the analyst will be concerned with whether a text was written as result of firsthand experience or from secondary sources, whether it was solicited or unsolicited, edited or unedited, anonymous or signed, and so on (Webb, Campbell, Schwartz, & Sechrest, 1966). As Ricoeur (1971) demonstrates, concrete

that the door stays shut after people have gone through. But use of this particular delegate has various implications, one of which is that very young or infirm people have difficulty getting through the door. A social distinction is unwittingly implied by this technology. In another example, Latour discusses a key used by some inhabitants of Berlin. This double-ended key forces the user to lock the door in order to get the key out. The key delegates for staff or signs that might order a person to "relock the door behind you." Staff or signs would be unreliable—they could be outwitted or ignored. The key enforces a morality. In the same way "sleeping policemen" (speed bumps) force the driver of a car to be moral and to slow down in front of a school, but this morality is not socially encoded. That would be too unreliable. The morality is embedded within the practical consequences of breaking up one's car by driving too fast over the bumps. The social and moral meanings of the door closer, the Berlin key, or the speed bump are thoroughly embedded in the implications of material practices.

I have suggested that in developing a theory of material culture, the first task is to distinguish at least two different ways in which material culture has abstract meaning beyond primary utilitarian concerns. The first is through rules of representation. The second is through practice and evocation—through the networking, interconnection, and mutual implication of material and nonmaterial. Whereas it may be the case that written language is the prime example of the first category and tools the prime example of the second, language also has to be worked out in practices from which it derives much of its meaning. Equally, we have seen that material items can be placed within language-like codes. But there is some support from cognitive psychology for a general difference between the two types of knowledge. For example, Bechtel (1990, p. 264) argues that rule-based models of cognition are naturally good at quite different types of activity from connectionist models. Where the first is appropriate for problem solving, the second is best at tasks such as pattern recognition and motor control. It seems likely then that the skills involved in material practice and the social, symbolic, and moral meanings that are implicated in such practices might involve different cognitive systems than involved in rules and representations.

Bloch (1991) argues that practical knowledge is fundamentally different from linguistic knowledge in the way it is organized in the mind. Practical knowledge is "chunked" into highly contextualized information about how to "get on" in specific domains of action. Much cultural knowledge is nonlinear and purpose dedicated, formed through the practice of closely

related activities. I have argued here that even the practical world involves social and symbolic meanings that are not organized representational codes but that are chunked or contextually organized realms of activity in which emotions, desires, morals, and social relations are involved at the level of implicit taken-for-granted skill or know-how.

It should perhaps be emphasized that the two types of material symbolism—the representational and the evocative or implicative—often work in close relation to each other. Thus a set of practices may associate men and women with different parts of houses or times of day, but in certain social contexts these associations might be built upon to construct symbolic rules of separation and exclusion and to build an abstract representational scheme in which mythology and cosmology play a part (e.g., Yates, 1989). Such schemes also have ideological components that feed back to constrain the practices. Thus practice, evocation, and representation interpenetrate and feed off each other in many if not all areas of life. Structure and practice are recursively related in the "structuration" of material life (Giddens, 1979; see also Bourdieu, 1977).

#### ◆ Material Meanings in Time

It appears that people both experience and "read" material culture meanings. There is much more that could be said about how material culture works in the social context. For instance, some examples work by direct and explicit metaphor, where similarities in form refer to historical antecedents, whereas others work by being ambiguous and abstract, by using spectacle or dramatic effect, by controlling the approach of the onlooker, by controlling perspective. Although there is not space here to explore the full range of material strategies, it is important to establish the temporal dimension of lived experience.

As already noted, material culture is durable and can be given new meanings as it is separated from its primary producer. This temporal variation in meaning is often related to changes in meaning across space and culture. Archaeological or ethnographic artifacts are continually being taken out of their contexts and reinterpreted within museums within different social and cultural contexts. The Elgin Marbles housed in the British Museum take on new meanings that are in turn reinterpreted antagonistically in some circles in Greece. American Indian human and artifact remains may have a scientific meaning for archaeologists and

biological anthropologists, but they have important emotive and identity meanings for indigenous peoples.

Material items are continually being reinterpreted in new contexts. Also, material culture can be added to or removed from, leaving the traces of reuses and reinterpretations. In some cases, the sequence of use can give insight into the thought processes of an individual, as when flint flakes that have been struck off a core in early prehistory are refitted by archaeologists today (e.g., Pelegrin, 1990) in order to rebuild the flint core and to follow the decisions made by the original flint knapper in producing flakes and tools. In other cases, longer frames of time are involved, as when a monument such as Stonehenge is adapted, rebuilt, and reused for divergent purposes over millennia up to the present day (Chippindale, 1983). In such an example, the narrative held within traces on the artifact has an overall form that has been produced by multiple individuals and groups, often unaware of earlier intentions and meanings. Few people today, although knowledgeable about Christmas practices, are aware of the historical reasons behind the choice of Christmas tree, Santa Claus, red coats, and flying reindeer.

There are many trajectories that material items can take through shifting meanings. For example, many are made initially to refer to or evoke metaphorically, whereas through time the original meaning becomes lost or the item becomes a cliché, having lost its novelty. An artifact may start as a focus but become simply a frame, part of an appropriate background. In the skeuomorphic process a functional component becomes decorative, as when a gas fire depicts burning wood or coal. In other cases the load of meaning invested in an artifact increases through time, as in the case of a talisman or holy relic. Material items are often central in the backward-looking invention of tradition, as when the Italian fascist movement elevated the Roman symbol of authority—a bundle of rods—to provide authority for a new form of centralized power.

This brief discussion of the temporal dimension emphasizes the contextuality of material culture meaning. As is clear from some of the examples given, changing meanings through time are often involved in antagonistic relations between groups. Past and present meanings are continually being contested and reinterpreted as part of social and political strategies. Such conflict over material meanings is of particular interest to qualitative research in that it expresses and focuses alternative views and interests. The reburial of American Indian and Australian aboriginal remains is an issue

that has expressed, but perhaps also helped to construct, a new sense of indigenous rights in North America and Australia. As “ethnic cleansing” reappears in Europe, so too do attempts to reinterpret documents, monuments, and artifacts in ethnic terms. But past artifacts can also be used to help local communities in productive and practical ways. One example of the active use of the past in the present is provided by the work of Erickson (1988) in the area around Lake Titicaca in Peru. Information from the archaeological study of raised fields was used to reconstruct agricultural systems on the ancient model, with the participation and to the benefit of local farmers.

#### ◆ Method

The interpretation of mute material evidence puts the interactionist view under pressure. How can an approach that gives considerable importance to interaction with speaking subjects (e.g., Denzin, 1989) deal with material traces for which informants are long dead or about which informants are not articulate?

I have already noted the importance of material evidence in providing insight into other components of lived experience. The methodological issues that are raised are not, however, unique. In all types of interactive research the analyst has to decide whether or not to take commentary at face value and how to evaluate spoken or unspoken responses. How does what is said fit into more general understanding? Analysts of material culture may not have much spoken commentary to work with, but they do have patterned evidence that has to be evaluated in relation to the full range of available information. They too have to fit different aspects of the evidence into a hermeneutical whole (Hodder, 1992; Shanks & Tilley, 1987). They ask, How does what is done fit into more general understanding?

In general terms, the interpreter of material culture works between past and present or between different examples of material culture, making analogies between them. The material evidence always has the potential to be patterned in unexpected ways. Thus it provides an “other” against which the analyst’s own experience of the world has to be evaluated and can be enlarged. Although the evidence cannot “speak back,” it can confront the interpreter in ways that enforce self-reappraisal. At least when a researcher

is dealing with prehistoric remains, there are no "member checks" because the artifacts are themselves mute. On the other hand, material culture is the product of and is embedded in "internal" experience. Indeed, it could be argued that some material culture, precisely because it is not overt, self-conscious speech, may give deeper insights into the internal meanings according to which people lived their lives. I noted above some examples of material culture being used to express covert meanings. Thus the lack of spoken member checks is counteracted by the checks provided by unspoken material patterning that remain able to confront and undermine interpretation.

An important initial assumption made by those interpreting material culture is that belief, idea, and intention are important to action and practice (see above). It follows that the conceptual has some impact on the patterning of material remains. The ideational component of material patterning is not opposed to but is integrated with its material functioning. It is possible therefore to infer both utilitarian and conceptual meaning from the patterning of material evidence.

The interpreter is faced with material data that are patterned along a number of different dimensions simultaneously. Minimally, archaeologists distinguish technology, function, and style, and they use such attributes to form typologies and to seek spatial and temporal patterning. In practice, however, as the discussion above has shown, it has become increasingly difficult to separate technology from style or to separate types from their spatial and temporal contexts. In other words, the analytic or pattern-recognition stage has itself been identified as interpretive.

Thus at all stages, from the identification of classes and attributes to the understanding of high-level social processes, the interpreter has to deal simultaneously with three areas of evaluation. First, the interpreter has to identify the contexts within which things had similar meaning. The boundaries of the context are never "given"; they have to be interpreted. Of course, physical traces and separations might assist the definition of contextual boundaries, such as the boundaries around a village or the separation in time between sets of events. Ritual contexts might be more formalized than or may invert mundane contexts. But despite such clues there is an infinity of possible contexts that might have been constructed by indigenous actors. The notion of context is always relevant when different sets of data are being compared and where a primary question is whether the different examples are comparable, whether the apparent similarities are real.

Second, in conjunction with and inseparable from the identification of context is the recognition of similarities and differences. The interpreter argues for a context by showing that things are done similarly, that people respond similarly to similar situations, within its boundaries. The assumption is made that within the context similar events or things had similar meaning. But this is true only if the boundaries of the context have been correctly identified. Many artifacts initially identified as ritual or cultic have later been shown to come from entirely utilitarian contexts. Equally, claimed cross-cultural similarities always have to be evaluated to see if their contexts are comparable. Thus the interpretations of context and of meaningful similarities and differences are mutually dependent.

The identification of contexts, similarities, and differences within patterned materials depends on the application of appropriate social and material culture theories. The third evaluation that has to be made by the interpreter is of the relevance of general or specific historical theories to the data at hand. Observation and interpretation are theory laden, although theories can be changed in confrontation with material evidence in a dialectical fashion. Some of the appropriate types of general theory for material culture have been identified above. The more specific theories include the intentions and social goals of participants, or the nature of ritual or cultic as opposed to secular or utilitarian behavior.

In terms of the two types of material meaning identified earlier, rules of representation are built up from patterns of association and exclusion. For example, if a pin type is exclusively associated with women in a wide variety of contexts, then it might be interpreted as representing women in all situations. The aspect of womanhood that is represented by this association with pins is derived from other associations of the pins—perhaps with foreign, nonlocal artifacts (Sorensen, 1987). The more richly networked the associations that can be followed by the interpreter, and the thicker the description (Denzin, 1989) that can be produced, the subtler the interpretations that can be made.

For the other type of material meaning, grounded in practice, the initial task of the interpreter is to understand all the social and material implications of particular practices. This is greatly enhanced by studies of modern material culture, including ethnoarchaeology (Orme, 1981). Experimental archaeologists (Coles, 1979) are now well experienced in reconstructing past practices, from storage of cereals in pits to flaking flint tools. Such reconstructions, always unavoidably artificial to some degree, allow some



direct insight into another lived experience. On the basis of such knowledge the implications of material practices, extending into the social and the moral, can be theorized. But again it is detailed thick description of associations and contexts that allows the material practices to be set within specific historical situations and the particular evocations to be understood.

An example of the application of these methods is provided by Merriam's (1987) interpretation of the intentions behind the building of a wall around the elite settlement of Heuneberg, Germany, in the sixth century B.C. (an example similar to that provided by Collingwood, 1956). In cultural terms, the Hallstatt context in central Europe, including Germany, can be separated from other cultural areas such as the Aegean at this time. And yet the walls are made of mud brick and they have bastions, both of which have parallels only in the Aegean. In practice, mud brick would not have been an effective long-term form of defense in the German climate. Thus some purpose other than defense is supposed. The walls are different from other contemporary walls in Germany and yet they are similar to walls found in the Aegean context. Other similarities and differences that seem relevant are the examples of prestige exchange—valuable objects such as wine flacons traded from the Aegean to Germany. This trade seems relevant because of a theory that elites in central Europe based their power on the control of prestige exchange with the Mediterranean. It seems likely, in the context of such prestige exchange, that the walls built in a Mediterranean form were also designed to confer prestige on the elites who organized their construction. In this example the intention of the wall building is interpreted as being for prestige rather than for defense. The interpretation is based on the simultaneous evaluation of similarities and differences, context and theory. Both representational symbolism (confering prestige) and practical meanings (the building of walls by elites in a non-Mediterranean climate) are considered. For other examples of the method applied to modern material culture, see Hodder (1991) and Moore (1986).

#### ◆ Confirmation

How is it possible to confirm such hypotheses about the meanings of mute material and written culture? Why are some interpretations more plausible than others? The answers to such questions are unlikely to differ radically

from the procedures followed in other areas of interpretation, and so I will discuss them relatively briefly here (see Denzin, 1989; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). However, there are some differences in confirming hypotheses regarding material objects. Perhaps the major difficulty is that material culture, by its very nature, straddles the divide between a universal, natural science approach to materials and a historical, interpretive approach to culture. There is thus a particularly marked lack of agreement in the scientific community about the appropriate basis for confirmation procedures. In my view, an interpretive position can and should accommodate scientific information about, for example, natural processes of transformation and decay of artifacts. It is thus an interpretive position that I describe here.

The twin struts of confirmation are coherence and correspondence. Coherence is produced if the parts of the argument do not contradict each other and if the conclusions follow from the premises. There is a partial autonomy of different types of theory, from the observational to the global, and a coherent interpretation is one in which these different levels do not produce contradictory results. The partial autonomy of different types of theory is especially clear in relation to material culture. Because material evidence endures, it can continually be reobserved, reanalyzed, and reinterpreted. The observations made in earlier excavations are continually being reconsidered within new interpretive frameworks. It is clear from these reconsiderations of earlier work that earlier observations can be used to allow different interpretations—the different levels of theory are partially autonomous. The internal coherence between different levels of theory is continually being renegotiated.

As well as internal coherence there is external coherence—the degree to which the interpretation fits theories accepted in and outside the discipline. Of course, the evaluation of a coherent argument itself depends on the application of theoretical criteria, and I have already noted the lack of agreement in studies of material culture about foundational issues such as the importance of a natural science or humanistic approach. But whatever their views on such issues, most of those working with material culture seem to accept implicitly the importance of simplicity and elegance. An argument in which too much special pleading is required in order to claim coherence is less likely to be adopted than is a simple or elegant theory. The notion of coherence could also be extended to social and political issues within and beyond disciplines, but I shall here treat these questions separately.



interpretations can be confirmed or made more or less plausible than others using a fairly standard range of internal and external (social) criteria.

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# THE ROUTLEDGE HANDBOOK OF MATERIAL CULTURE IN EARLY MODERN EUROPE

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in a *Balsambüchse*, or portable medicine holder (Coscarelli), and the sight of moral exemplars like the Four Evangelists, David playing his harp and Samson and Delilah on an ornate Dutch *beeldenkast*, where women stored linen, ‘all incorporating tiny inscriptions, which suggests the need for close viewing’ (Hamling). Following the gestures which individuals performed in their daily lives, you might come upon the sensation of a tight shoe which needs a shoehorn to get it onto the foot; the dextrous gesture required to use a banqueting trencher, ‘a fingertip touch to grasp and lift the wafer-thin plate off of the table, flip it over and rotate it in the hands’; or to produce women’s fingerloop braiding of a Katherine Wheel as ‘a haptic engagement with their spiritual beliefs’ (Cope; Jackson; Sibthorpe). But these are just a few brief journeys you might take – led by your curiosity, you can choose to follow individuals through their connections with a range of objects, rooms, ideas or particular qualities of experience in specific countries or amongst certain types of people.

### Material culture in early modern society: Key issues

Although we are not yet in a position to draw conclusions about early modern European material culture in general, reading across these chapters does suggest key issues which bear further consideration in the work which you might go on to produce when you’ve finished reading – they’re not ‘facts’ which hold true across Europe, but they are key dynamics in which material culture played a significant role. In the highly stratified societies to which these individuals belonged, for example, we can see the social structure laid bare in day-to-day interactions, such as disputes over church seating or dress, for instance. This type of practice could be set within the wider context of the Europe-wide phenomenon of the threat which new merchant and professional classes increasingly posed to the established elite and social commentators’ growing willingness to acknowledge the presence of new families in the ranks of that elite, their claims progressively based on wealth. Material culture in this period was fundamentally implicated in the negotiation of a **rapidly changing social structure**, and this volume offers particular insights into the role of middling groups in negotiations with their inferiors and superiors. Noticeable across the chapters is, for instance, the steady rise of a new group of professional men whose roles put them in interesting relationships with material culture and suggest changing connections between knowledge and skills, practice and theory. Some of these men inhabit roles developed from previous incarnations, such as the Heralds of the College of Arms who studied family history and heraldry with a new professionalism, or the elite cooks who presided over new technical and artistic innovations (Cust; Pennell). But some were entirely new roles – for instance professional undertakers offering expert knowledge of available options to the newly bereaved (Mytum), a greatly expanded group of administrators in new bureaucratic roles (Maguire and Smith), or the first official London City Pavier (Gordon).

In the context of such changes in the social hierarchy, these chapters invite assessment of the **relationship between consumption and status**. They offer a sweep from high to low – Elizabeth I wearing Mary I’s cloth of gold coronation robes to stress the legitimacy of female rule and Tudor continuity (Hayward); the elite starting to identify with ‘the contours of the land they owned’ through estate or county mapping (Klein); Turkish carpets which were neither ‘exclusive rarities . . . nor commodities within the reach of everyone’ but rather ‘exotic’ and ‘novel’ objects that people aspired to possess’ (Riello); the possibility of seeing

a broadside ballad pasted up in the alehouse or at home (Fumerton et al) – through which we can see the circulation of many kinds of goods and begin to question the narratives of the emulation of the elite by their social inferiors as, for instance, Antwerp’s bourgeoisie saw mass markets flourish in relation to their desires in the absence of a strong elite patronage network (Baatsen et al). These chapters open up debate about whether material culture can be separated into ‘popular’ and ‘elite’ and how materiality might have been engaged in broader social processes of division and appropriation – employed to mark different groups off from one another. We are beginning to theorise cultural ‘popularity’ in relation to early modern print now (e.g. Kesson and Smith 2013), but how do such ideas relate to other categories of early modern object? A general conclusion deriving from many of the chapters sees the rise of the urban merchant and artisan class and their consumer power as one of the single most defining characteristics of the period and its materiality.

And these chapters suggest we should broaden out our assessment of consumption from the purchase of objects to, for instance, the choice to insert a staircase as part of fitting a house out appropriately as a mayor’s residence (King). Separating out coach travel and city walking (Gordon), or the studies and writing closets associated with ‘spatial, temporal, and economic privilege’ from the ‘practical privacy’ available more widely (Orlin) allows us to define specifically early modern attitudes towards **socially stratified behaviour within space**. We can explore how far up and down the social scale knowledge of different concepts and practices might have travelled: for instance, ‘the theoretical and technical knowledge underpinning the understanding of the qualities, elements and humours’, through popular practices, oral traditions and textual materials; or cures for bewitchment ‘situated amongst elite, intellectual and scientific systems of knowledge, read by a range of people across wide social and spatial geographies’, in order to establish common ground in ways of ‘knowing and experiencing the world’ (Sullivan and Wear; Thwaite).

The work represented here allows us to understand **levels of investment** in materiality related to modes of making before industrialisation. Threaded through the chapters is comparative information on **processes of manufacture**, from ‘munition-quality’ pieces of mass-produced armour (Grummit; Mercer), to tomb workshops, an embroidered mirror frame or a Venetian harpsicord (Cust; Canavan; Dennis), which suggests a particular early modern way of using things invested in methods of making and sensitive to their ability to convey the techniques by which they were made. Making was a part of cultural exchange – the movement across Europe of craftspeople escaping religious persecution shaped the physical and aesthetic nature of the objects produced, providing, for instance, ‘a range of new styles and motifs ideally suited to showcasing the themes associated with lineage’ (Cust). Similarly, across Europe, we can see the development from import of foreign commodities and skills to endogenous (local) industry which imitates imported forms and raw materials (Baatsen et al). These changes suggest the extent to which, for some commodities and in some places, we can talk about a genuinely European material culture where choices were made in cognisance of the decisions and objects made in other countries – in courtly fashion perhaps, or in those major cities like Venice, Rome, London and Antwerp which acted as gateways by provisioning a fully articulated European market. Objects from different countries drew attention to difference, and discussion of imports was therefore important in the creation of both individual and national identities. While some domestic activities for people at the lower end of the social

scale in particular could be undertaken in an entirely locally provisioned way, even relatively commonplace actions like smoking, drinking and eating were on one level at least partly international (McShane and Jeffries).

Another key determining factor for early modern material culture was the intersecting paths of **changing commodity cultures and confessional identities**. You will read analyses of sacred objects, such as the altar whose sanctity spread out into its linens and the liturgical vessels that were used on them, provoking strong reactions and defining particular responses, either of official blessing and lay reverence or of violent attack during iconoclastic riots (Spicer); or the worshippers who connected lives and spaces by donating ex voto paintings in exchange for divine domestic intervention (Galandra Cooper and Laven). But the centrality of religious identity to all spheres of existence ensures that its ripples are felt right across the chapters: objects from gingerbread moulds in the shape of saints which allowed the faithful to celebrate feast days at home, to changes in body disposal and commemoration, to the iconography of diplomatic coaches that celebrated the Roman Catholic faith bear evidence of the shaping power of religious perspectives on material form (Pennell; Mytum; Llewellyn). Several chapters discuss tensions between the aesthetic qualities, value and spiritual role of objects which exceed practical use and, as these tensions suggest, there is a great deal to be learned here about popular belief too – through witch-bottles and concealed shoes, or about salt as a weapon against the devil, ‘both mundane and potentially marvellous’ (Thwaite; Hewitt; Pennell).

If we broaden this **relationship between the mundane and the divine** to consider points where the non-material meets the material, then a whole range of activities, such as the pursuit of alchemy and the pseudo-science of heraldic definition, ‘often endowed with semi-mystical overtones’, can be seen trying to negotiate the gap (Cust). There are thought-provoking echoes in the nature of theatre, where spectacle becomes ‘a locus of doubt, where the line between subjects and objects collapses through the interrogation and unhinging of the real’ (Bailey). Studying material culture questions the relationship between the physical and the metaphysical, the sacred and the secular, and asks where we should set the boundaries and how we should explore the mindsets that make connections across spaces, practices and faith.

The chapters that follow fire up ideas about the particular qualities and position of early modern materiality – what factors governed its power and influence? There are hints of a **distinctive temporality** in a period of religious, political and material change: goods that endure to be willed between the generations; the alterations and reworkings by new, often amateur and domestic craftspeople which kept clothing functional and fashionable at all levels of society; the re-purposing of a stoneware vessel as a witch-bottle; or the contrast between partitions added within houses as ‘lasting measures’ for sons when their father died, and the temporary arrangements made for widows (Cope; Hayward; Thwaite; Orlin). Personal labour could lead to localised ways of working, as regionally distinctive ‘cultural reactions to death’, for instance, were ‘negotiated through the washing, dressing, and display of the body’ in the home (Mytum).

**Early modern labour** added many different kinds of value. As material practices often occupied a middle ground between aesthetic embellishment and religious intent, preparations such as the consecration of an altar stone by a bishop, ‘who anointed the four corners and then the centre with holy oil and sealed holy relics in a cavity within it’, would fall into the category of adding spiritual value (Spicer). The re-valuing which comes with such industry

is part of a wider aspect of early modern materiality – the **significance of additional applied work**. It could be one element of the cost of a commodity, for instance hand-applied colour, ‘which brought up the price of maps or atlases by a third or more’ and might often be added at the request of the purchaser (Klein). It could also be the site of gendered displays of skill and dexterity on the part of amateur craftswomen, such as the maker of a mirror frame who embroidered the different textures of the grass ‘with diverse techniques and materials, including chenille, purl, and overtwisted silk’ (Canavan). Additional work dignified the item and therefore made it fitting as a medium for transferring respect and affection – a suitable gift, such as the daggers with etched blades, ‘handles and sheathes or scabbards . . . damasked and encrusted with precious gems’ (Bailey) – aesthetically pleasing ornaments that beautified the receiver too. These details were linked to the visibility of the object, as was the case for wall monuments within churches, whose ‘degree of elaboration’ gave them ‘commemorative prominence within the structure’ (Mytum). Such visibility might also be linked to legibility for the object’s audience, for instance in the many categories of things that feature ‘decorative but meaningful and often moving figure work – globes, scientific instruments, street furniture, ships’ figure heads’, figures which ‘accompany representation or add commentary or act as way-finding tools’ (Llewellyn; Gordon).

As some of these examples suggest, added details were also the means by which objects were keyed into the **aesthetic trends of fashion**, such as the ‘intensified use of Islamic ornament in Venice’, which defined the fashionableness of harpsichords by connecting them to other up-to-the-minute items and indicates close collaboration between different kinds of craftsmen (Dennis). But in some places and times there was a marked development of distrust of excessive ornamented fashion, often in a Protestant context. Excessively ‘curious’ or ‘fantastical’ linen accessories, for instance, ‘came to be a sign not of deep ‘cleanliness’ but of superficial, extravagant affectation, if not dissimulation’ (Korda and Lowe). Those embellishments point too to a rather different configuration of early modern connections between utility and aesthetic value which trouble our own disciplinary boundaries between art history’s traditional interest in artistic quality and a broadly conceived social history’s interest in use. In Antwerp, majolica seems to have crossed a dividing line from pot to art object: sought primarily for its design and its decorative value, its producers were enlisted as members of the guild of St. Luke, ‘the craft guild of artists’ (Baatsen et al). In some societies with a highly developed aesthetic sense at least, like Venice, how a thing looked was not a ‘superficial afterthought’, rather ‘an intrinsic part of its identity and an important facet of its function’ (Dennis). Aesthetic form is also linked to the drawing out of an audience’s emotion, funerary monuments in particular demonstrating changing attitudes towards grief, expressed as a Baroque engagement with highly charged emotion (Llewelyn).

Another key defining feature of early modern materiality explored below is its connections to a **developing print marketplace**. In almost every chapter, you can read about a written text which stands in an active relationship to a material practice. For instance the 1558 act for ‘having of horse, armour and weapon’ that established new obligations (Grummitt), or the *Instructionem fabricae et suppellectilis ecclesiasticae* published by Carlo Borromeo in 1577, a ‘compendium of earlier ecclesiastical ordinances’ which ‘served as a manual for those visiting churches in the archdiocese of Milan to implement the Tridentine decrees and ensure uniformity’ (Spicer). The latter took authority in its turn from the Bible, and from scriptural

precedent and classical authors such as Galen, texts of the past inspired the early modern writings that shaped materiality, translated and reprinted across Europe. There was an interesting mixture of translated texts from across Europe and a developing local market, the balance different on different subjects – fast to take off on domestic practice, slower on painting, for instance (Hamling; Tittler). These texts were explicitly produced to organise material practice. Partly as a response to the growing complexity of material culture and partly as a function of the increasingly professional approaches to recording it, there was a marked **increase in technical terminology** which covered ‘garments, fabrics, colours, trimmings, and accessories’ (Hayward); the ‘baffling names of the dishes served up by the royal cook’ (Pennell); or a ‘developing specialist (and frequently arcane) nomenclature of arms and armour’ (Grummitt). Language registered the significance of material engagements with objects and sensory responses, such as words to describe perfume and its effects: ‘ambered, civited, expired, fetored, halited, resented, smeeked . . . breathful, embathed, endulced, gracious, incensial, odourant, pulvil, redolent, suffite’ (Karmon and Anderson). New professional men increased the complexity of material operations, producing a detailed **culture of administration** in heraldic funerals, for instance (Cust). These lists of terms can cause practical problems for the historian of material culture who has to try to marry them up with contemporary images and extant examples. They testify to swiftness in the development of forms: as new or changing types like the portrait began to settle down into a more stable materiality, so the terminology associated with them solidified and became standardised (Tittler).

**New print genres** were also emerging which attempted to develop and document material cultures and practices. Some translated the material features of an event into visual or written form, prolonging its impact by replicating it in another medium. Examples include festival books which commemorated European dynastic alliances, with their ‘orchestration of food in feasts, allegorical displays and ‘happenings’ ’ (Pennell); the maps of areas the size of countries or continents which ‘were based on written information and the evidence of eyesight, not on innovative mathematics’, translating visual information into text and then into image (Klein); or the relationship between the uproar caused by the arrival of a rhinoceros (the first since antiquity) into Lisbon as a gift from Sultan Muzafar of Cambay to Emanuel I of Portugal, and the print of it produced sight-unseen from written sources by Albrecht Dürer in several thousand copies which amplified and substituted for the ‘real’ object, partially undoing its rarity (Riello). Many of these ‘translations’, such as urban descriptions which ‘emerged from habits of politic recording devised to inform diplomatic strategies and the arts of governance’ (Gordon), lent themselves to a self-consciously comparative European perspective. This concentration on the relationship between different **modes of representation** went beyond print – Tittler argues in his chapter on portraits that the ‘very close imbrication of writing and painting must be recognised as a distinctive and defining characteristic of the era’. Whatever their claims to verisimilitude, these representational forms were never direct and never disinterested, of course. As Riello argues with respect to Asian objects, ‘the power of imagination – for instance through paintings – served to amplify the[ir] cultural value and presence’. Representations could magnify the significance of and desire for material culture, as well as simply augmenting its audience.

These printed texts and images stand in an interesting relationship with material practice, sometimes coming before to shape it (like the didactic literature on cooking, music



or militia training), sometimes after to record it, and sometimes maintaining a seemingly more complex connection to it – the text of a play, for instance, which might have been performed both before and after it was printed. We might also see writing *on* things in this latter context, as developing literacy changed attitudes towards **memory and identity** – ‘textual and ornamental markings on items used for cooking’ such as a skillet marked ‘ye WAGES OF SIN IS DEATH’ (Pennell); writing on portraits which described the individuals depicted and their merits (Tittler); the handwritten text, ‘The Persian sybill letts us knowe, that Christ should come to us before, and riding on an asse in peace, shall cause all oracles to cease’, added to a banqueting trencher (Jackson); funeral monuments on which a verse about a mother’s grief ‘explains the kerchief that her effigy carries’ (Llewellyn); the names and dates on elaborately decorated shoehorns (Cope) or plates (Chung) or woven into decorative braid (Sibthorpe). This movement between doing and thinking explicitly about material actions is a feature of a period of developing print, literacy (broadly conceived) and material environment.

In the case studies that follow of material culture in action across Europe we can glimpse a range of early modern ‘curiosities’ for new goods, different environments and distinctive ways of living life. A larger group of individuals came to see their material interactions in a wider European context across this period – a mental map of the continent and its material exchanges was coming into focus for men and occasionally women further down the social scale than ever before.

### Note

- 1 Written on the back of woodcuts held at the Huntington Library, as part of the assertion that they can be traced back to the seventeenth century: ‘The notes continually emphasize the ancient character of the cuts and also their pre-circulation through all of England . . . reiterated are phrases such as ‘very curious’’. See Chapter 23.

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**Northern Jewish Studies Partnership Research Workshop:  
The Study and Conceptualization of Material Objects  
25 June 2019**

**B. Practical Reading**

## CATALOGUE FIELDS FOR DESCRIPTION OF AMULETS PHILIP ALEXANDER AND STEFANIA SILVESTRI

The following sample cataloguing exercise of a material object was created between Philip and Stefania trying to bridge the gap of describing an object in the fixed categories of the Text Encoding Initiative [TEI P5], a global standard for the electronic description of texts and artefacts used by libraries and museums.

When working with TEI XML, one has to bear in mind that this was created and is still vastly used to describe texts and the objects that bear those texts, i.e. codices, scrolls, fragments. Thus when describing objects with little or no text, the distinctions and categories established in the coding system have to be adapted.

The categories, always dealt with separately in TEI XML, are:

- The *intellectual description*, strictly related to the text. In the case of object amulets, where there is no text, the section for “content description” will serve solely for the indication of the main function and use of the amulet.
- The *physical description* includes mainly dimensions, decorations and condition.
- The *history* section involves dating, origin, acquisition and any other information on the history of the object.
- *Facsimile* is the digital image of the object.
- *Text* which is used to transcribe any text from the source.

### 1. Shelfmark

## CONTENT DESCRIPTION:

### 2. Title

ONLY for written amulets (*not used for object amulets*)

3 types of title:

- a. Hebrew/Aramaic/Arabic title (as it appears in the text)
- b. Title in transliteration
- c. Descriptive title if you can think of one or if there is one that identifies that specific object (such as “Barcellona Haggadah”): example Amulet against the evil eye / Beaded amulet / ...

If there is the Hebrew/Aramaic/other language title you’ll have to indicate on which side and line of the text you can identify the title. Use ‘side a’ and ‘side b’ to indicate the side, since recto and verso can be problematic in a digital environment with many languages (and many ways of opening a book).

### 3. Summary

Use this section to give a general description of the content of the object, in which the title should also be included. For example: “Amulet” against the evil eye. Include here information on the mode of use and function, keeping this as brief as possible: e.g. *ring for the protection of a child, beaded necklace against the evil eye*. (if you need more space use ‘5. Notes’, see below)

I wouldn't worry too much about the category, but if you wish to include something about it I would probably do it here.

*The standard distinction is into **A. paper/parchment amulets**, and **B. Object amulets**. But the terminology is not exact, since a paper amulet is as much an object as a metal amulet. The distinction is essentially functional: paper/parchment amulets allow for more text, and the power tends to be carried by the text, whereas in the case of the object amulets the shape, material, and construction comes into play. There may also be an inscription but it has to be less extensive than on the paper/parchment amulets, and abbreviation is regularly used. Some object amulets rely totally on the shape, material, and construction. Category A amulets may be written on cloth or other such materials, not just on paper/parchment.*

#### **4. Author**

I believe there won't be an author, but in case there is, you can indicate it.

#### **5. Notes**

This will include additional information that you weren't able to include in the summary:

##### **a. Mode of use**

*This relates to how the amulet was used. Most amulets were carried on the person whom they were meant to protect, but just exactly how has to be deduced from the object itself. Long strings of beads would have been worn as necklaces. Shorter strings of beads as bracelets or anklets. Rings would have been worn on fingers. Metal plaques with an "eye" of some sort at the top would have been hung on a ligature round the neck, and so on. One must remember that till modern times dress in many parts of the world would not have included pockets. Some amulets, however, are too big to have been plausibly carried on the person, and must have been hung on walls*

##### **b. Function**

*By function we mean the purpose for which the amulet was intended. This will largely be deduced from the nature of the amulet itself, and the kind of text it contains, though tradition and general knowledge also have a part to play. Some amulets are all-purpose, general apotropaics, others have a more defined and specific purpose (protection of a child, pregnant woman, ward off the evil eye, etc.).*

#### **6. Bibliography**

Include here just bibliography strictly related to the text.

#### **7. Languages**

*Languages should be listed: these will normally be Hebrew, Aramaic, Arabic*

### **PHYSICAL DESCRIPTION:**

#### **8. Support**

This section includes the description of the object and includes a machine-readable noun, which defines the material, and a general description that can include doubts.

##### **a. Material**

The machine-readable noun has to be always the same, thus I'll need a list of authorised heading.

The following are suggested: METAL – PAPER – PARCHMENT – CLOTH – MINERAL – GLASS – CERAMIC

*Metal, paper, parchment, cloth, bead etc. Many amulets are composite: all the materials should be listed. Metal can be a problem. The standard metal is silver, or adulterated silver, but also brass. Can be a problem identifying the metal. The make-up of necklaces etc can also be problematic. Beads can be of semi-precious stones, of glass, or glazed ceramic etc. Can be very difficult to tell*

**b. General description**

*E.g.: “Keyhole-shaped thin metal plaque inscribed in Hebrew script on both sides. Ring at top for hanging from ligature”. There will need to be a vocabulary of shape developed and used consistently (square, rectangular, triangular, circular, rhomboid, scalloped, etc.). “Rectangular” could be divided into “portrait” or “landscape” depending on how the text is to be read.*

In this description you should include the material and the ‘grade’ of certainty of identification. For example, if the material is METAL in the heading, you can then add in the description: “thin metal plaque, probably silver”

**9. Dimensions**

*000mm x 000mm (in millimetres)*

These can be *height, width* and *depth*. For necklaces, bracelets, the length will be set as height. For beads please give the approximate maximum dimensions (h-w-d).

[graph paper is perfect]

The dimensions can be of different *type* and refer to different things, and you will need to provide many of them:

“leaf”: if the amulet is a single leaf

“rolled” (=folded): if the amulet is rolled or folded

“written”: if the amulet is written, this is the written section

“ruled”: if the amulet is written, this is the ruled section

“bead”: if it’s a beaded amulet, give the approximate dimension and *the numbers of beads (if they are the big ones, that can be easily counted)*

“chainlength”: if the amulet is a necklace, a bracelet...

“binding”: if the amulet is wrapped something, please give the dimensions of this paper, cloth...

*Measurements are going to be a problem because many amulets are irregular in shape, and it is hard to measure the length of a bracelet or necklace if there is no clasp (string can be used in the latter case). Maximum dimensions should be recorded in each case (graph paper useful for this). Beads might also be a problem: small, medium, large might do, but not ideal.*

**10. Condition**

Please add a brief description of the conditions of the object: for example, slight water damage....

**11. Layout**

Please add the layout of the text: columns and ruled lines – if relevant

**12. Hands**

*Scripts should be listed: these will normally be Hebrew, Aramaic, sometimes Arabic, and magical alphabets (characters). The Hebrew, Aramaic and Arabic should be paleographically classified.*

For Hebrew:

- Oriental, Yemenite, Persian, Sephardi, Ashkenazi, Italian, Byzantine
- square, cursive, semi-cursive

### **13. Symbols and decoration**

I will include everything in the section called "Decoration". In addition to the symbols/shapes that you indicated, you should specify if there is a table (number of rows and columns), a diagram (maybe you can describe it) or similar. If in the tables/diagrams there are inscriptions, these will have to go into the inscriptions section (but I will be able to link them)

*Symbols should be listed: these can be classified into two main types: (a) shapes and figures: e.g. hexagram, pentagram, hand, half-moon, eye. And (b) abstract symbols, which could include colours, materials, and kinds of semi-precious gems. It is not always easy to distinguish between a symbol and decoration. Some amulets have an aesthetic as well as an apotropaic function, and part of their design may serve purely artistic ends. Hard sometimes to tell.*

### **14. Binding**

You can add here a description of the binding, meaning for example if it's wrapped in paper, a pouch.

## **HISTORY:**

### **15. History**

**Place and date of Origin:** example 'Produced in Morocco in the 18<sup>th</sup> century'. Ddd here names of individuals/nomina barbara

**Provenance:** something concerning the history of the object: example 'Handwritten label attached reading in 2 lines in English: Morocco / Amulet against Evil Eye'.

**Acquisition:** example 'Acquired by the John Rylands Library from the heirs of Moses Gaster in 1954' – *have this info already.*

*Not easy, but there is a development of amulets over time and quite distinctive regional variations.*

### **16. Additional**

*This field would be used to record any notes on the amulet, not covered in the fields above, similar amulets elsewhere in the collection or in other collections.*

### **17. Bibliography**

*Relevant bibliography (e.g. a publication which refers to the amulet or a similar amulet).*

### **18. Facsimile**

*Ideally a digital image should be included. The image should contain a centimetre bar and a colour bar.*

### **19. Text (inscription)**

*Inscriptions should be recorded side a and side b. Where amulet is inscribed on both sides, the more elaborate, visually impressive inscription may be taken as the front. Where amulet is inscribed on only one, the black side is side b.*

*Ideally one should transcribe the inscriptions and identify known texts (e.g. Biblical)*  
Please transcribe the text as accurately as possible, and especially indicate text division (line, column), so that I can type it in TEI accordingly. The same with any kind of abbreviation, correction, conjecture.



**Northern Jewish Studies Partnership Research Workshop:  
The Study and Conceptualization of Material Objects  
25 June 2019**

**C. Optional Reading**

# Researching Material Culture

*Edited by*  
**Susan Pearce**



**University of  
Leicester**

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Occasional Papers No 1

2000

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The Material Culture Research Group was founded in the University of Leicester in 1998. It is an interdisciplinary group dedicated to developing the study of relationships between humankind and material objects.

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# 1. Researching Material Culture: Introduction

*Susan Pearce*

The design on the jacket of this volume<sup>1</sup> endeavours to show that the same line – a socially meaningful mark on the void which creates a tiny definition within eternity and space – determines either a group of human heads or a gathering of glass vessels, depending upon the mood, the eyesight, and the philosophical position of the viewer; and, of course, the viewer is inside the frame not beyond it, because otherwise she or he could not recognize the images or understand their implications. This simple metaphor takes us to the heart of the material culture project. It poses the key challenge of how we can re-think traditional ideas about how social relations are created and sustained in the face of the new appreciation of the impact of the material world which has emerged from disciplines like archaeology, psychoanalysis and cultural studies, and profoundly influential thinkers like Walter Benjamin.

These studies have made it clear that ‘things’, in the broadest sense, have a performative and integrative capacity which enables what we call society to come into being, and to continue to go on being itself. We see the study of material culture as part of a concern with *praxis*, social practice, and objects themselves as one set of actors in a combination of space/place/things/action/people which performs being, which draws from history, which is open to changes, and through which the trajectory of individual and collective lives are created. Among other issues, the new studies have demoted language in its spoken and written modes from its premier position in the generation of social culture by suggesting that it is interaction between humankind and its material environment which generates linguistic communication rather than the other way round, while recognizing that, once launched, language, too, is an active social constituent.

The material culture project is to understand better how humans relate to material objects, defined as produced by the human capacity to select elements of the natural world and transform them by constructed significance. In this working definition, the key words – select, transform, construct and signify – are best seen in their active verbal forms, in conjunction with the

appreciation that while objects (as their name suggests) are traditionally perceived as passive, they operate as part of social performance in which they acquire the capacity to float free of their original signification and become active subjects, themselves able to challenge changed or renewed meanings. Consequently, they offer a field in which humans can create rules of engagement through which accounts of self and community can be achieved.

Fundamental to the project is the concept that, although broad human material needs essential to the maintenance of physical existence may operate at the utilitarian level, in all specific designations all material culture is always symbolic. Objects are always symbolic of themselves. This re-evaluation of our material environment is deeply involved in the critical assessment of what is usefully called ‘post-modern’ society, that is the kind of society produced by the late twentieth century in which the idea of social reality as a purely social realm – realised through institutions like the family, the workplace, the located community – has been exposed as inadequate. Post-modern societies, it appears, can muddle along without much structure or argued theoretical foundation no more or less happily than their more obviously coded predecessors, and one of the important ways in which they do this is by acknowledging the imaginative capacities of the material world through freer play, unfettered by earlier obscuring institutionalisations, which had, for reasons of their own, been impossible in earlier modern societies. And so we see the creation of a new league of significance for practices like fashion, shopping, sport, the version of the past known as ‘heritage’, spectacles, virtuality, dancing, and all the other beautiful strangers of contemporary society, together with the studies which attempt to analyse them.

What, then, were the characteristics of earlier modern societies which made the effective nature of the material world so difficult to recognize? Modernist society as it emerged in north-western Europe around 1650 was grounded on the assumption that there existed a fundamental and essential distinction between man and nature, subject and object, soul and body, God and the

world, mental and physical, and so when Descartes said 'I think, therefore I am', he also meant the converse, that entities who do not apparently 'think', are not. (By the same token, the history of feminism may be seen as the effort to move women from the object to the subject class). The archaeology of these distinctions, of course, runs deep into the Christian and classical past. Upon this 'essential' distinction have been erected the characteristically modernist constructions of idealism *versus* materialism, agency *versus* structure, essentialism *versus* contingency, and all the other dichotomies which permeated modernist culture and which were translated into an internally coherent web of institutions which produced social practice.

The assumption that human thought and agency is essentially superior, and that the material world is our natural empire, has proved so ego-boosting and so productive of scientific, technological and commercial enterprise, that it has been difficult to dislodge. However, as the detailed contexts of the twentieth century have produced the consumer and the flâneur (and the odd flâneuse), so they have also undermined the old hierarchies of certainty, enabling us to break down the evidently unreal distinction between object and subject. Instead, the focus is upon a concern with social *practice*, in which on-going individual and collective lives are fashioned through a concept of integrated objects, places and actions, which draw from the past and yet which are open to change as small balances continually shift. The detail involved in the creation and change of this active social practice is well-nigh inexhaustible, and correspondingly the approach to its understanding requires finely-drawn, nuanced study, a level of loving care in data gathering and descriptive endeavour without which nothing worth saying can be said. But equally, it is possible to identify a range of themes or fields of discourse, operating at a variety of levels, which are currently of great interest to scholars, and a similarly useful range of critical concepts which have shown themselves capable of exciting explanatory power. Furthermore, and very significantly, the material culture project is one where a sense of its own historiography and its effects upon the workings of objects in the world, is very important. The project is one *par excellence* in which due appreciation of the multi-layered nature of experience (i.e. the original event; the immediate reportage of the event; the sequence of re-workings of the event; the critique of the whole sequence through contemporary analytical apparatus) is particularly crucial, and must be taken on board in any account of the parameters of study in the field.

A number of caveats should be entered here. The creation of this kind of 'thought grid' (Fig. 1.1) could well be seen as a collapse back into the kind of 'this and that' classificatory dichotomy, the inadequacy of which has already been remarked. This is true, and it is why some of the tropes mentioned would be equally at home in either area of the grid since they can operate with equal facility as a theme or as a mode of analysis. Equally each, it goes without saying, is flawed, or at least incomplete, and vulnerable to a range of theoretical objections (see Hides, this volume). Also, since the material culture project works within a rich, dense, overlapping and multi-layered complex of human experience, running up and down the millennia, it can often best be approached in research terms through a judicious mixture of quantitative and qualitative, or 'thick' ethnographic, data informed by a range of critical concepts. It is very important to realise that, whatever its immediate area and time frame, each analysis draws on experience within the broad project and plays into all other analyses. Like all research fields on the cusp of a range of disciplines, a locally restrictive view of relevance must be rejected in favour of one which emphasises the interlocking and cross-fertilising nature of particular research endeavours. What we are really talking of here is a something more like a series of plot possibilities, which can serve as an *aide-mémoire* and around and within which projects for the study of material culture can stir and take shape. Within the parameters offered here, none are necessarily more fundamental than any others, and this should constantly be borne in mind: the themes and critiques described here are not to be seen as in any hierarchical order, and should be regarded as fuzzy-edged.

#### **Fields and Critiques: Some Parameters.**

Some of the more significant *fields* which suggest themselves may be listed, together with some of the more salient elements which they embrace, remembering that here we should expect some overlapping and eliding of notions.

#### **Consumption**

- technologies of production and consumption
- analysis of relationship between consumption and production
- notions of possession
- exchange in all its forms (gift, trade, shopping, etc.)
- notions of 'home' and why
- the creation of self-identities through the poetic of consumption
- voyeuristic consumption

**Spectacle**

- producing of ideology through the managed environment, townscapes, landscapes
- production of ideology through ceremonies, processions, etc
- market/goods/shops as display
- past and environment as spectacle – heritage sites, museum exhibitions
- assorted shows and peep shows

**Aesthetic**

- what an 'aesthetic' is; what 'taste' is
- notions of style, design and fashion
- space into places, the aesthetic of disposition and relationship
- aesthetic cognition through corporeal senses
- fakes, copies, skeuomorphs, mechanical reproduction

**Accumulation**

- accumulation, manipulation of surplus, power-broking
- hoarding
- collecting as practice in the long term
- grave goods
- practices of deposition

**Bodies**

- body as material field (tattoo, scarification, piercing, mutilation)
- preserving dead body parts (medical, mummies etc, relics)
- bodies as material objects (slaves, prisoners, patients, children/elderly)
- sex objects (women, fetish gear, pornography)

**Nature into (Material) Culture**

- animals and plants as sources of information
- animals and plants as objects (grown to produce particular foods, butchered in special ways, trained in special ways)
- riding animals, traction animals viewed as material
- food and drink/cooking and preparation/meals
- 'natural' specimens named, classified, and collected
- animals, and plants, as spectacle
- 'nature' transformed into human social economy: landscaping and gardens, interior decoration, pets, zoos

**Virtual Realities**

- objects that exist in cyberspace through IT manipulations
- 'virtual' realities on film, television, CD Rom, etc

**Words and things**

- linguistic relationships (e.g. why do some languages gender inanimate objects and others not)
- philosophical problem of 'subject' and 'object'
- literary production (e.g. material evidence in detective fiction, objects in historical novels, collecting as a literary motif, the object as quest; material as metaphor as a literary theme)

Intersecting *critical approaches* to the analysis of these fields, which have potent explanatory power, can also be set down.

**Psychoanalysis**

- contemporary approaches to psychoanalysis
- poetics drawn from specific psychologists of the broader cultural significance (Freud, Klein, Abrams and Toruk, Kristeva, etc)
- questions relating to existence or non-existence of 'essential' human nature
- sexualities
- notions of the sacred

**Methodology**

- critique of notions of 'evidence'
- critique of ethnographies and qualitative data gathering
- critiques of quantitative data gathering

**Sensory Perception**

- apprehensions of reality through sight, smell, touch, sound and taste
- nature of brain/nervous system
- perspectives on 'normality' and 'abnormality'
- effects of hallucinatory and other drugs, etc
- status of 'extra-sensory' or para-normal experiences

**Discourse analysis**

- close scrutiny of available information to (hopefully) achieve 'thick' or 'dense' view



## Researching Material Culture

- of what was and was not said and done
- detailed contextualisation of issues intended to connect words, actions and effects
- assessment of how this detail both matched local trajectory and/or helped to deflect it

## Narratives of Material Culture

- broad range of epistemological issues
- understanding of relationship between media and message
- discourse analysis of narrative modes (e.g. the excavation report, the catalogue, the specialist report, the distribution map, etc.)
- analysis of modes of producing material culture as bodies of evidence, e.g. the collecting process, the excavating, the field surveying process
- analysis of the institution (research group, university department, museum, learned society, funding agency, publishing house, etc.)
- analysis of agencies of production (factories, advertising and marketing firms, media companies, wholesalers, transport, shops, etc.)
- critique/appreciation of concept of material culture as language
- critique of major writers and their influence (e.g. Marx, Benjamin, Veblen, Simmel, Baudrillard, Jameson, Bourdieu, Foucault, DeBord, etc.)

## Issues in the production of history

- issues of judgement and intuition in relation to relative significances within a limited time span
- notion of the 'Zeitgeist'
- productions of chronological sequences
- ideas of 'long-term' and 'fragmentation'
- historicism of 'modernism' and 'postmodern'

## Ideological Critique

- Mechanisms of power and dominance, critique which embraces a range of overarching issues e.g. colonisation, gender, Queer theory, class, identity
- Material culture as producing change
- Issues in commodification and reification

This approach to the analysis of material culture lends itself readily to the construction of the kind of grid represented in Fig. 1.1. It involves a purchase on the nature, and the framing of

materially based research projects, which can be seen to draw upon one or more fields of practice and consider them in the light of particular critical concepts, although, as has already been remarked, it is equally possible to work the same equation from a number of directions.

Attention has already been drawn to the time depth within which material culture operates since one of its most significant characteristics is its capacity for perpetual re-interpretation as both consequence and constituent of change. The model attempts to express this by offering the grid at a series of time levels, which can, of course, be multiplied infinitely. This can be criticized as an unduly restrictive and mechanistic model for a subject characterised by its fluidity, but what it does, perhaps, is clarify the internal temporal relationships within a research project. This, in turn, helps to make explicit the ramifying moments of historical evidence, reportage, re-working, and contemporary research which a material culture project typically involves.

Within this volume, Christie and Kipling explore how *spolia* from the townscapes of early/mid Roman imperial cities were re-worked in the cities of Late Antiquity, using contemporary conceptual apparatus drawn from psychoanalysis (emotions concerning continuity and security) and ideological critique (analysis of power relationships), together with techniques drawn from discourse analysis aimed at connecting with the felt realities of local experience, something very difficult without substantial documentary evidence. Pearce attempts something similar, by analysing how the view taken of classical material in the late eighteenth century helped to produce a particular view of the historical object which is now itself a matter for analysis, using discourse analysis. Scott uses notions drawn from aesthetics to re-frame how we, now, should think about the potential variety of aesthetic stances in the Roman world and links this to the ideological deconstruction both of the classical world itself, and, more particularly, to the centralist-standard view wished upon the Roman Empire by nineteenth and earlier twentieth century imperialist art historians.

Palmer is also concerned with the built environment, that of European industry as it began to develop in the later eighteenth century. She makes use of the techniques of the historian and ideological deconstruction to demonstrate how large townscapes were laid out in order to facilitate trajectories of the economic and social power structures loosely called capitalism. O'Sullivan is interested in how gender is

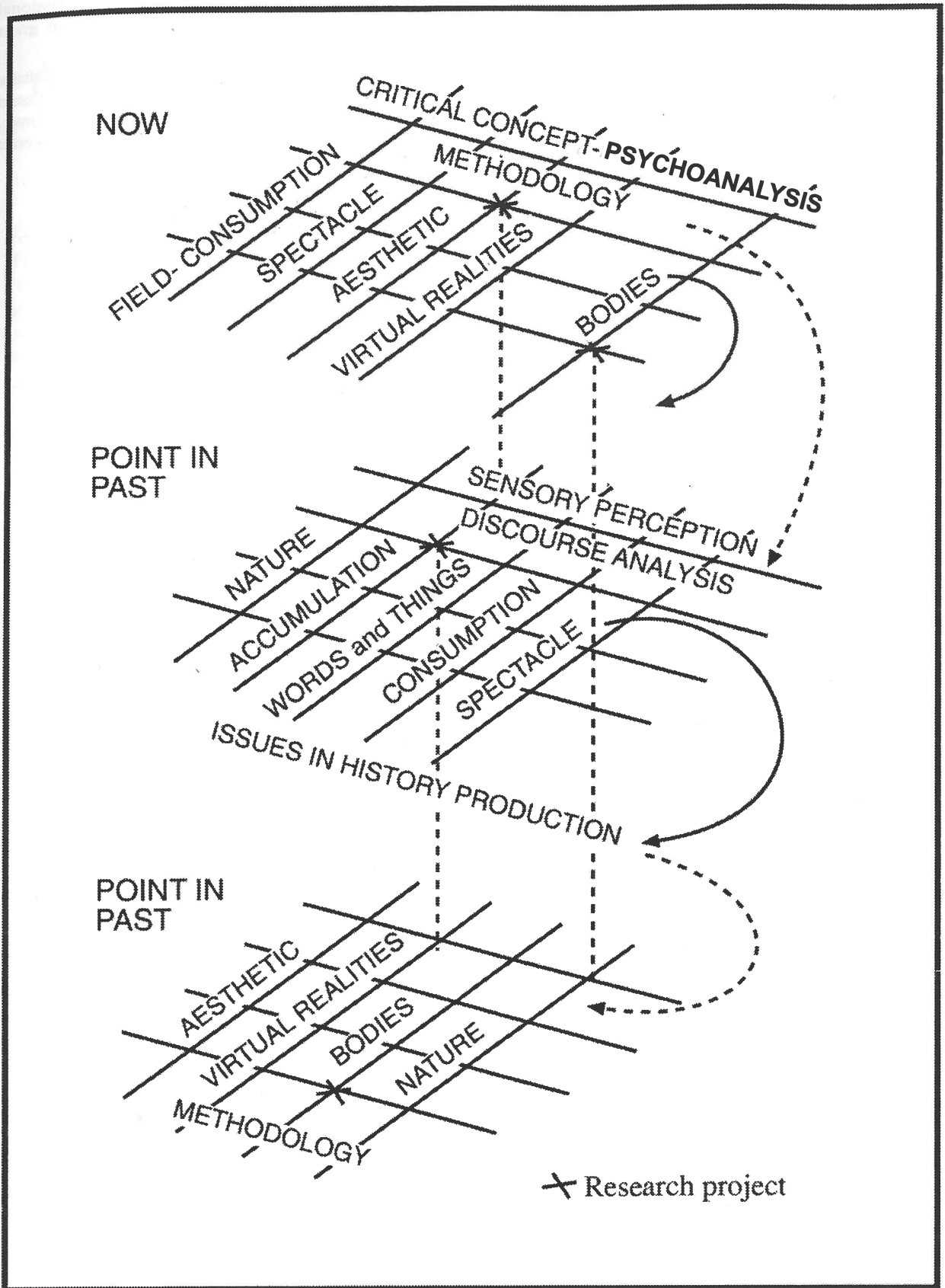


Fig. 1.1 The production of research in material culture.

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constructed especially through the creation of museum exhibition spectacle. She investigates how the effects of such performances can be the subject of ideological deconstruction.

Cooper and Hall both take somewhat different tacks. Cooper is concerned with the crucial issues of how methodologies operate and may be criticised, mediated in this paper through Romano-British material. Hall takes this opportunity to open up what is, in this extensive and organized fashion, a new field for material culture studies, that of the appropriation of individual objects, collecting, and museums by the producers of cinema film. This involves both the consumption of what are, in some senses, virtual objects, and adds an investigative level to analysis which recognizes the construction of a layer of supra or alternative contemporary operation, which, like all levels past and present, influences contemporary life by both legitimising and subverting its view of the normative. In view of the importance of this new area, and the lack of data, the opportunity was taken to include Hall's annotated list of relevant films as a substantial Appendix, which will act as reference and inspiration.

#### **Endnote**

The papers in this volume were all first delivered to seminars organised as part of the programme of the Material Culture Research Group (MCRG). The MCRG was founded in March 1998 in response to a growing recognition of the advantages which an interdisciplinary focus for research into material culture would bring. The Group is dedicated to developing the study of the relationships between humankind and material objects through encouraging the recognition that practitioners in a number of disciplines are drawn together through this shared interest in material things. Material culture study, like many fields at the cutting edge of contemporary academic activity, is indeed on the cusp of a number of disciplines, and can benefit greatly from the sharing of investigative data and conceptual thinking. MCRG now draws together archaeologists, art historians, and those working in cultural studies and museum studies, within the University of Leicester and other institutions. It aims to be inclusive, and welcomes new participants<sup>2</sup>: staff, students, museum workers, and all those with a serious interest in the field.

This volume is MCRG's first public offering, and it is intended for all those practitioners engaged in material culture research.

1. I wish to thank Alan McWhirr and Peter Woodhead whose efforts made the production of this volume possible. I also wish to offer grateful thanks to the

University of Leicester Continuing Professional Development Committee for a substantial grant which supported the volume.

2. For further information about the Material Culture Research Group, please contact Professor Susan Pearce, Faculty of Arts, Attenborough Tower, University of Leicester, University Road, Leicester LE1 7RH.