concepts that reach for studied intellectualism, we run the risk of regressing to the nineteenth-century pattern of separate spheres in the company of the Barnums and the Baldwins. Conversely, if we recognize common goals and are vigilant about working toward them together, perhaps we can continue to improve the translation of new research into public consciousness and enhance the value of museums in the social order.

Material Culture History

The Scholarship Nobody Knows

Cary Carson

By now we all can recite the catechism by heart: all artifacts are evidence; all evidence is text; all texts are open to discourse; all discourse is socially constructed; all social constructions seek hegemony; and all hegemonies dominate through the exercise of power. That formula has become the litany of modern academic scholarship. It has made its way into material culture studies as well, including several essays appearing in this volume. These are not the only insights to be found here, fortunately. If they were, I would be spoiling the reader’s fun by giving away the ending at the outset.

Even that would hardly be disappointing. The social construction of reality became the explanation du jour too long ago to surprise anybody anymore. The study and interpretation of much American history today aims predictably at demonstrating that all truths are relative—all except the one enduring truth that tenured historians, given their druthers, still prefer famous dead white males. So, not surprisingly, little people, persons of color, and womankind en masse have risen up to take back their unappreciated heritage. Textbooks, classrooms, and museum galleries are pulled to and fro in a great tug-of-war for intellectual and ideological possession of the past. As a consequence, American history is enormously invigorated. As another consequence, the narrative of that history hangs in tatters.

Belief in the empowering capacity that comes from history-telling has infused material culture studies with tremendous popular enthusiasm. Those of us who study the material record of American history
say a rosary of our own. It was drilled into us by that stern Old Testament prophet Henry Glassie and his latitudinarian sidekick James Deetz. Again, we all know how it goes: objects are genuine; they tell the truth; written records are contrived; they tell half truths; artifacts are the products and possessions of ordinary people; diaries and documents are rationalizations by elites.

Frequent incantation has thoroughly inculcated the material culture credo: only artifacts preserve the authentic voice of the inarticulate. Only touching and seeing can be truly believing. Never mind that we also learned along the way that objects mean different things to different interpreters. Never mind that the social history of ordinary people—a growth industry for twenty years now—has been written overwhelmingly from recorded sources. Never mind that museum collections, vernacular landscapes, and even major archaeological assemblages come up embarrassingly short on the little people's artifacts. Forget the ambiguities and contradictions. They take away nothing from the fact that material culture studies are still energized by our zeal for a populist American history. Slave cabins, folk art, American Indian handicrafts, workers' housing, women's wares, Africanisms, and all other such stuff of everyday life are so important to collect, study, exhibit, and write about because they connect men and women newly sensitized to their ethnic, racial, and gender differences with their own authentic pasts, not with the ancestors of the homogenizers and hegemonizers. The indescribable variety of American material culture demonstrates and validates our diverse backgrounds. The sheer commonness of commonplace artifacts rolls back the centuries and makes the experience of our forebears seem immediate, familiar, real, and believable. All its contradictions to the contrary notwithstanding, we still want to believe that this history of material life is the gateway to a more open, more equal, more democratic, more popular American history.

That seductive promise set off a gold rush to material culture studies. From small beginnings twenty-five years ago as an esoteric and misunderstood offshoot of American Studies, the field has become an esoteric and misunderstood academic discipline in its own right. There are fellowships and endowed chairs. There are presses, prizes, journals, and newsletters. Best of all, there are even some jobs. Scholarship grows annually and exponentially in every direction. To speak confidently of “shaping the field” is like planting the borders of an ornamental garden with kudzu. The call for papers for the 1993 Winterthur Conference, where these essays were first presented, produced more than ninety proposals. Those selected by the organizers dealt with landscapes, aesthetics, ceramics, childrearing, gender, clothing, building, burial practices, technology, and much more. Their authors call themselves curators; geographers; art, architectural, and social historians; anthropologists; archaeologists; and educators. There is hardly a field or profession where the study of material evidence has not raised new questions or brought new insights to old ones. So why not let ourselves kick back and take some well-deserved satisfaction from these obvious accomplishments? Surely so many good and well-intentioned works of scholarship have begun to produce the general reeducation in historical thinking that was supposed to justify material culture studies in the first place. Just look at the popularity of social history. See how race and gender are rewriting schoolbooks and rethinking museum exhibitions. These signs must be proof that our populist scholarship is indeed changing the public's perceptions of American history.

Dream on! Alas, such wishful thinkers are fooling only themselves. There is little evidence that students of material culture deserve much credit for the indisputable success that social historians, ethnologists, women's historians, and African American historians have achieved in raising the general level of historical consciousness. Maybe we material culture historians can congratulate ourselves forstocking people’s imaginations with the lively pictures of the past that often serve as starting points for learning social history. But beyond that, there is not much to show. Sadder still, many of us don’t actually care as long as we can get together at conferences and workshops to debate our specialty in the language of Marx, Freud, Lévi-Strauss, Derrida, and Bakhtin. We don’t really care whether the general public has any use for angels dancing on pinheads or not.

We mean well. Our knees jerk, and our hearts bleed. We tell each other that we sincerely want to make a difference. We conscientiously go looking for victims of oppression and exploitation in our research and fieldwork, and the theorizing we do pores wheezy old orthodoxies full of holes. But be honest. Who is the wiser outside our little circle? Why have material culture studies produced so much excellent scholarship that nobody knows and nobody heeds?

Ruling out hypocrisy, which I do, we are left looking for an expla-
nation in the nature of material culture studies themselves—that is, in the practice of our scholarship. Has the way we have been thinking and writing about this subject somehow obstructed communication with a nationwide audience of history learners? Should they not be keenly interested in subjects that are near and dear and sometimes troubling to their hearts, namely, their appetite for consumer goods, their anxieties about their own standards of living and their kids' diminished prospects for the future, their addiction to materialism at the expense of other values, and so on? These are the questions I want to answer by looking at some of the best work that material culture scholars have produced.

First, though, am I right about the problem of our marginality? Or is my concern just a case of crying wolf? Claims on popular influence (or the lack of it) are always hard to substantiate with numbers. So I resort to two personal anecdotes. Both have happened more than once. Presumably that gives them credibility.

My wife, Barbara Carson, has been teaching and writing about material culture since she graduated from the Winterthur Program in Early American Culture. At dinner parties she is often asked what she does for a living. When I hear the question coming, I cringe. A little voice inside me warns, "Don't be too honest. Just tell them you teach American Studies or maybe art history, or, if you must, 'the metaphysics of capitalist bourgeois consumer psychology from a feminist perspective.'" But no, she tells them she teaches material culture. They smile politely. "You know, tables and chairs," she explains, "and how people use them and how that behavior has changed through history." After that, their faces tell you that their minds are experiencing momentary technical difficulties. They don't get it! Material culture does not sound like any history they ever learned in school, and for some reason it raises not a single historical question about their own complex material lives. Material culture history gets a big fat zero for public recognition.

What about the academy? Surely there our hot new scholarship is known and admired. Consider anecdote number two. Nowadays history professors have to be more guarded than John Demos was ten years ago. Reviewing the Boston Museum of Fine Arts show "New England Begins" for the William and Mary Quarterly, he thought he was being generous when he accorded material culture studies "a margin of legitimacy among historians." He called the field "a side stream—adjacent to, but rarely intersecting with, the main currents of scholarship." That is no longer a politically acceptable way to talk about the work of tenured colleagues who by now head departments and hold endowed chairs. But many historians still think that way privately—and for reasons that make good sense to them. Now and then, they let down their hair to me because a museum historian comes from another solar system anyway. "Cary," they ask, "what are the really 'big books' by material culture scholars—the ones that define major issues, advance new arguments, and generally shake up everybody's understanding of American history? Who are your Beards, Bailyns, Morgans, and Morisons?"

After twenty years, I can no longer bring myself to answer that we are still growing up. Regrettably, even the report card from school puts few material culture scholars on the dean's list.

So I repeat, how can scholarship that we find so exciting have had so little influence on either our academic colleagues or on the rank-and-file public whose forgotten heritage the study of artifacts was supposed to rescue and rehabilitate? At the last Winterthur Conference on this subject, twenty-one years ago, I told a decidedly younger audience that "the study of artifacts has contributed to developing the main themes of American history almost not at all." Youth was my excuse then. Now we have to take a hard look at the scholarship we have produced in the meantime—at the books and exhibitions that should have communicated our brightest ideas about material life in America. Are they the problem somehow?

By my count they fall into four genres. Only one or two resemble scholarship in other disciplines where scientists and humanists sometimes do teach laypeople to see themselves, society, and the wider world with fresh eyes. The others are curiously introverted and introspective.

The most numerous and familiar could be called interpolations. The books, articles, and exhibitions in this category always take their intellectual starting point from a collection of associated objects. The author or curator then sets out to discover something for these objects

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to mean. She or he interpolates the assemblage of things by overlaying them with ideas that purport to explain the meaning of their relatedness and their significance historically. This laid-on interpretation is the narrative "discourse" that is performed on the artificial "text." That process elevates these works above mere description and transforms them into certifiable material culture studies. Sometimes the interpolated material is, as the word implies, spurious or, at the very least, contrived. Occasionally, the fit between the collection and the meaning ascribed to it is a genuine meeting of mind and matter that leads to highly original historical insights. A few classic monographs on Anglican churches in Virginia, apartment houses in New York City, the River Gods' mansions along the Connecticut River, parlors, parlor organs, earthfast buildings, teaware, children's portraits, and fiddle-back chairs are now read and cited primarily for the historical topics they address and not just for the background they provide to better understand the artifacts they illustrate.¹

Museum exhibitions can also interpret collections by interpolation. Several years ago the Margaret Woodbury Strong Museum organized a temporary show on Victorian parlors and upholstered furniture.²


A collection of extraordinary sofas and side chairs—dripping with lambrequins, portiers, antimacassars, drapery loops, and tassels—was set alongside a rich selection of book illustrations, stereographs, and photographs showing furnished parlors in use. "Culture and Comfort" was a feast for the eyes and a treat for visitors who were surprised to be told in the labels "Do Touch" the sample upholstery swatches and "Do Sit" on a reconstructed parlor chair. The objects and their attractive installation would have guaranteed the show's success all by themselves. But the historian and curator aimed higher. They arranged the images and artifacts to help visitors see through the clutter of Victorian parlors to the central theme of the exhibition. Middle-class American women, the organizers argued, furnished "the little world of the parlor" to be both comfortable and cosmopolitan. It was their way of resolving a critical tension in nineteenth-century culture between home-sweet-home and the world outside. "Culture and Comfort" exhibited ideas first and foremost. The objects took their places and their meaning accordingly.

Exemplary publications and exhibitions are exceptions to the rule. Yet even they resemble other works in this genre in the priority they give to artifacts as the motive force to intellectual inquiry. This collection-based approach is characteristically our own. Researchers in other disciplines study the past quite differently. They start with an unresolved historical problem and let that lead them to whatever bodies of evidence they think will help them find answers. By contrast, material culture scholars are basically collectors and curators at heart. They resemble art historians in that respect. If given a choice between interesting questions or interesting collections, the objects take precedence. Fortunately in practice, we are less and less often forced to make that painful choice because these days questions and answers about class, race, and gender are peanut butter that sticks to any collection.

The special privilege we accord to artifacts is one reason for our scholarship's small influence outside the club. Object-centered mon-

enc Smith, editor; Kevin Murphy, designer. Visitors received a brief gallery guide. Instead of a conventional catalogue, the museum published a "work of social and cultural history" by Katherine C. Grier, which bore the same title and date as the exhibition. The show was reviewed in the American Historical Association's *Perspectives* 26, no. 8 (November 1988) and the *Journal of American History* 76, no. 1 (June 1989); the publication was reviewed in *American Quarterly* 41, no. 3 (September 1989) and the *New York Review of Books* (November 9, 1989).
graphs and object-rich exhibits need not raise significant historical issues at all to attract publishers and sponsors or satisfy readers and visitors. Consequently, many do not bother. Those that make the effort almost always turn out to be derivative because they almost always borrow ready-made interpretations from some other branch of knowledge. “Culture and Comfort,” for instance, however thoughtful, recycled historical ideas that had made their first appearance in feminist scholarship two decades earlier. Where a given group of associated artifacts is thus deemed the indispensable genesis of historical inquiry, the odds are a hundred-to-one that that particular collection will happen to tell us something genuinely original about the past, something that is not already known or could not be known more fully and explicitly from other sources. Shots in the dark are not a reliable way to reshape ideas in any field.

Perhaps that is the reason why some of our most thoughtful colleagues have turned their minds to modelmaking and demonstrations of theory. Their work, which I lump together into a second genre of material culture studies, aims ambitiously at remaking the rules that govern the way scholarship is played. Authors and teachers more often than exhibitors, these men and women deserve credit for raising intellectual standards and practices in our field in several constructive ways. Some are taxonomists who have devised various useful classification systems to organize conceptual thinking about material life methodically and logically. These people are framework builders. At one time or another they have included E. McClung Fleming, Jules Prown, Kenneth Ames, Philip Zimmerman, Ann Smart Martin, and Edward Cooke, just to name those who perfected their sorting and sifting skills at Winterthur. There are others as well.

Gerald W. R. Ward, ed., Perspectives on American Furniture (New York: W. W. Norton, 1988), pp. 115–26. Not all model builders have apprenticed at Winterthur. One who has not, Thomas J. Schlereth, is also a frequent commentator on the state of the field; see Thomas J. Schlereth, Material Culture Studies in America (Nashville, Tenn.: American Association for State and Local History, 1982).

Let me repeat the compliment I paid them earlier. These model builders and theorists have raised intellectual standards in material culture scholarship enormously. Through their good offices, we meet leading thinkers outside our own field. From applications of their taxonomies and theories, we learn to recognize the fuller implications of our ideas and imagine new dimensions that our own work might take in the future. All the same, we ourselves remain the sole beneficiaries of this scholarship. Research strategies and demonstrations of theory are school figures intended exclusively for those who already do material culture studies, plus a few bystanders from other disciplines who may be watching from the sidelines. These innovative works of theoretical scholarship are, therefore, even less likely to come to the notice of outsiders than are monographs and exhibitions.

Both genres import, not export, their best ideas. Have we written or exhibited nothing that redresses the imbalance of payments to American history with some bright new insights that we have coined ourselves?

Yes, we have. Before I describe this third group of material culture studies, I should answer two criticisms that surfaced at the Winterthur Conference where this essay was first presented. Some who heard it briddled at my suggestion that material culture specialists owe anything to mainstream American historians. “No handmaidsen we!” they huffed. Furthermore, populists and social reformers though they professed to be, they were reluctant to accept the logic that the success of our scholarship depends ultimately on making a dent in the average man or woman in the street.

There is no reason to take umbrage at either assertion. To argue that our very specialized subdiscipline should be part of some large intellectual enterprise, and that somehow that enterprise ought to make a significant difference to people outside the academy, is not to malign the monographic scholarship in which most of us are happily and productively engaged. We desperately need more groundbreaking local research. Big questions are usually resolved by answering smaller ones first. Or they should be. Specialized studies are the only solid groundwork on which defensible syntheses can be raised—but not all specialized studies indiscriminately. Successful local research must be deliberately designed to produce the theoretical and methodological tools that can help us hammer out the major conclusions we seek. Scholars in other disciplines know the value of toolmaking. Take the sciences and social sciences for example. Breakthroughs in those fields almost always come on the heels of numerous technical experiments that chip away at important problems piece by piece. Likewise, new interpretations in history are usually anticipated by previously published books and articles that test pertinent hypotheses against controlled bodies of evidence. Some ideas are discarded, and others are validated in the process.

We material culture scholars characteristically shortcut this process at both ends. I already explained that our research often starts not with questions worth asking but with a collection of objects searching for something worth answering. From there, our next steps usually follow fairly conventional scientific and historical research procedures. We examine our data for evidence of variation, and, where we find it, we look for patterns in those variations that might be clues to the different or changing behavior of the people to whom the artifacts belonged. Patterned variation begs questions about particular historical contexts. Who were the original owners and users? What activities brought these objects into play? Were the variations that we observe the makers’ solutions to different users’ different requirements or to users’ needs that changed over time?

Answers to such questions can be found more readily than we often want to admit, either by carefully studying the objects themselves or, more often, by consulting written records. This kind of background research is painstaking and unglamorous. Unfortunately, some of the pioneering scholars in our field have encouraged the view that it is also unnecessary. Their example has fostered a bad habit of rushing to judgment. Leaving the spadework to somebody else, they have gone straight to the megathinkers, tried on their glass slippers, and, when one finally fits—presto!—they have discovered their princiely explanation. Thus, standard research procedures are cut short at the end as well as at the beginning of the process.
Henry Glassie started us down this fast track twenty years ago. Taking a collection of folk buildings he surveyed in Louisa and Goochland counties, Virginia, he developed a grammar of traditional house designs based on a system of binary oppositions and concluded (with a nod to Noam Chomsky and Claude Lévi-Strauss) that "bilaterally symmetrical, tripartite structures mark Western quests for control." Explanations on this scale are accepted as widely as American Express. No surprise then that archaeologist James Deetz, sorting through "small things forgotten" in Plymouth, Massachusetts, discovered a suggestively similar three-part pattern to the material culture of that region. The explanation he offers in his widely read primer on early American material life—that colonial culture first replicated, then diverged from, and finally rejoined its parent English culture—is a scheme, he acknowledges, that "owes its form to Professor Glassie."  

The point is not that Glassie was necessarily wrong about modernizing influences on folk culture, or Deetz about the "re-anglicization" of New England, or Mark Leone and Paul Shackel about the class-consciousness and social control that accompanied the rise of merchant capitalists in eighteenth-century Annapolis, Maryland. The point is that none of these ideas was learned from close study of the men and women who left behind the artifacts that archaeologists and folklorists later recovered and recorded. Instead, the interpretations were borrowed wholesale from the published works of Lévi-Strauss, Michel Foucault, Pierre Bourdieu, Marx, and others. Fundamental principles that they had deduced from their own close studies of native peoples in Brazil, nineteenth-century asylums and prisons in Britain and France, and the failed European revolutions of 1848 were uprooted and plunked down on rural Virginia, Plymouth, and Annapolis without so much as a by-your-leave. Any other three localities could have served equally well. One size fits all. The universality of theory is indeed its chief selling point. Each respectively is touted as the mother of all explanations. Philosopher Christopher Tilley said it most bluntly, "The field of material culture studies is one concerned with the relationship between artefacts and social relations irrespective of time and place."  

To be perfectly frank, interchangeable meanings imposed from the top down, irrespective of time and place, sell artifacts short by treating them merely as illustrations and not as primary evidence at all. By trying to explain too much, too easily at one level, they manage to explain too little at a lower level where local and regional studies should be expected to make original contributions. Cognitive structures, hermeneutics, and general theories of class warfare offer no explanation whatsoever for the obvious differences in material culture from one place to another. Presumably, those differences were due to circumstances that also varied from place to place. Case studies are only valuable when they account for those differences. Only by thoroughly understanding the mechanisms that drove historical change in one locality can we hope to create an analytical tool—a working hypothesis—that can then be used to test its efficacy elsewhere and thereby possibly to extend its explanatory reach farther afield. The goal is always to discover the larger forces at work in history, including those that shaped material life. Solid success will come incrementally by raising bigger and bigger ideas on a well-built foundation of local research that demonstrates, not just asserts, the links between people's everyday experience and the production of their material culture.

It turns out in the end that we are all handmaiden's. We all are engaged in the common enterprise of writing and exhibiting American history. Students of material culture cannot understand and resolve the problems that interest them most without becoming, or without borrowing from, historians who practice other specialties. Likewise, those other scholars need our help to ask smart questions about the history of material life and to decipher the physical evidence that holds some of the answers.

Reenter the average man and woman in the street. Sometimes

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scholars forget that most laypeople could care less how we experts carve up American history. They see it whole when they bother to see it at all. They take it or leave it depending on our ability to show them that the history lessons that we are eager to teach can provide useful perspectives on their own lives and times. We underestimate our own intelligence, not theirs, if we believe that we are doing our public duty by sorting the past into neat little piles of splinter histories. They want the parts put back together. So should we. The theorists are right about one thing. Big ideas communicate more meaning than little ones. Specialized research, local studies, and our new-found appreciation for the extraordinary diversity and variety of the American experience reduce the risk of oversimplifying history. But complexity is no excuse for shirking our professional responsibility to contribute to the larger task of rewriting a unified narrative of the nation’s past.

There is, as I promised, another group of publications and especially exhibitions, all fairly recent, that has already taken us a step or two toward that goal. Together they form a third noteworthy genre in material culture studies. These works investigate the way objects function as instruments that have actively shaped human experience. The authors and curators of these books and shows take culture to mean learned social behavior and material culture to be that subset of social behavior conditioned and mediated by inanimate objects. The material world for these scholars is not simply a mirror that reflects other realities of culture and society. Material things are not merely semiotic indicators of social status, for instance, or proxies for wealth levels, racial identity, gender differences, ethnic origins, good manners, fashion knowledge, or religious convictions. These writers and exhibitors prefer to believe that objects have been indispensable agents of change in producing these other measures of self-identity and group consciousness. Their scholarship groups objects together not according to their makers, materials, styles, or provenances but jumbled together in their real-world functional associations—for example, everything a New England farmer used to furnish his seventeenth-century parlor, all the accoutrements that a Washington hostess required to set her table for a dinner party, or the whole kit of fittings and fixtures that lawyers and magistrates expected to find in an eighteenth-century Virginia courthouse. Today we hear a lot about “contextualism.” It means much more than the generalized historical background or pastiche of everyday life that, once upon a time, adequately explained the meaning of artifacts to students of material culture. Contexts are now understood to be physical sites and meeting places of the mind where dynamic social encounters took place among people who consciously and unconsciously used landscapes, buildings, furnishings, food, clothing—indeed, goods of every kind—to order and conduct their everyday social relations.

Such works, whether publications or exhibitions, begin to resemble the problem-solving histories familiar to other students of the past. They hint at a large social-history story, yet to be told, about the development of our materialistic modern culture and the democratic-capitalist state that supports it. This social history of material life should not be confused with the histories of material things themselves. Nor is it merely “new social history” illustrated with artifacts. The history of material life presents its own important account of people’s increasing dependence on inanimate objects to communicate and mediate their relationships with one another and to guide their daily progress through the social worlds they inhabit.

The latest breakthrough experiments in this new American history of material life still lie buried in the professional literature, except significantly for a few exhibitions. Often the subject comes packaged as something else altogether. There are the goods-as-communications studies that originated with anthropologists and psychologists. Eventually they acquired a historical dimension, at first clumsily handled by

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sociologists but nowadays accomplished with considerable finesse by chroniclers of the so-called village enlightenment in New England and by commentators on the social landscape of plantation slavery in the South. Closely related are other monographs that describe power struggles between social and cultural adversaries who manipulated everything from knives and forks to urban landscapes to assert their upmanship and enforce their domination.10

Some material culture historians claim to be writing a prologue (others say a sequel) to the history of the Industrial Revolution, an equally momentous modern transformation they call “the consumer revolution” or describe less dramatically as “the rise of a consumer society.” Both are terms of convenience that suggest greater unanimity than actually exists among the eclectic scholars engaged in this work. Their numbers include green-eyeshade economic historians whose talents lie in measuring standards of living in the past. There are cultural historians who seek the origins of consumer demand in changing lifestyles. The spread of gentility to middle-class Americans and its marriage to capitalism are other directions research has taken. Literary and intellectual historians focus on mass culture as popularized and promoted by magazines, department stores, world’s fairs, and advertising agencies.11

Little by little, American consumers have come to enjoy the attention that historians in earlier generations once paid to Puritans, patriots, and pioneers and, more recently, to slaves, women, and children. Yet curiously, these consumer ancestors cut almost no figure at all in the public’s recollection of American history. A few leading history museums are trying to change that. The consumer revolution of the eighteenth century, a subject hotly debated for more than ten years in the scholarly literature, still awaits the blockbuster exhibit it deserves. So far, only the Smithsonian Institution has given the subject even temporary gallery space at the National Museum of American History.12


12 “New and Different: Home Interiors in Eighteenth-Century America” (Aug. 1986–Sept. 1987): Anne Golovin and Rodris Roth, curators; Robert Selim, editor; Dru Colbert, designer. No catalogue accompanied the show. Three years after the exhibition closed, the museum responded to numerous requests for the full text by issuing a "script" and design for the exhibition." It republished the labels with illustrations of all the objects and images and also included design drawings and photographs of the final installation. The
Most museums that collect consumer goods concentrate on the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, when mass production turned out goods in prodigious numbers. Their exhibitions pick up the consumer story in eras closer to our own. Again, the Smithsonian takes the prize for being first. "Suiting Everyone: The Democratization of Clothing in America" opened at the Museum of History and Technology during Daniel Boorstin's tenure as director. The show was as much a reflection of his own idiosyncratic interest in consensus-building "consumption communities" as it was a forerunner of the consumer-society scholarship that is to come. All the same, it set an example that other museums and curators have finally begun to follow in making the story of American materialism an acknowledged part of our national heritage. Exhibits such as "Streamlining America," at the Henry Ford Museum in Dearborn, Michigan, and "Smoke Signals," at the Valentine Museum in Richmond, Virginia, have encouraged visitors to see such everyday objects as toasters, phonographs, lipsticks, and cigarettes as "social products." They demonstrate how industrial design, advertising copy, and the narratives of popular entertainment have transformed useful things into the dreams that shape personal identities and reinforce (or occasionally challenge) cultural hierarchies.


14"Mechanical Brides: Women and Machines from Home to Office," at the Cooper-Hewitt National Museum of Design in New York City, took an unabashedly feminist perspective. It explored the making of the modern woman through the design and marketing of laundry equipment, kitchenwares, telephones, and typewriters. These mostly male-made products have been sold to women as labor-saving miracles that could liberate them from backbreaking housework and dreary office routines. The "sell" has come in glorifying women's traditional roles as the family homemaker and the boss's helpmate. So far, this and a few other exhibitions are almost the only channels historians have used to inform popular audiences that Americans have been defining themselves for several generations through the products they buy and use.

Two important books published since 1992 have begun to position the consumer revolution so squarely in the full context of early American history that even general readers cannot fail to recognize that the country's love affair with material things goes back to its very beginnings. The Refinement of America by Richard L. Bushman and Stephanie Grauman Wolf's As Various as Their Land make the most explicit connections that historians have yet drawn between the history of material life and those hardy staples of American textbooks—republicanism, capitalism, religion, and the rise of cities. Their success at folding material culture topics into the contours of a familiar national narrative places these two very original contributions to early American scholarship in a fourth category. Like other contextual studies, they proceed on the assumption that material possessions have profoundly
shaped people’s self-perceptions and their social relations since the outset of the modern era. These newest works go further. They explore the ramifications of the country’s materialistic values on the acculturation of immigrants, on Americans’ incessant moving around, on expanding concepts of quality, on the popularity of capitalism, on the gentrification of religion, on women’s domestication, and on other themes that figure in the story about the American past that historians and history learners already know. In short, these few pathbreaking books and exhibitions begin to put material culture studies into a national, even international, picture.

Future scholarship in our field looks most promising in that direction, I believe. But there are hurdles still to clear. To steer material culture studies to the center of American history, self-styled populists need to remember something that we have all but forgotten from our radical past, something that the general public knows instinctively. The pursuit of happiness—and why else are we materialists?—has seldom proceeded without a clash of interests. Those who clamor to share America’s bounty more widely, fairly, and prudentially have always been opposed by forces of selfishness and exclusivity. One person’s happiness often comes out of someone else’s pocket or someone else’s hide. When Thomas Jefferson enlisted the Creator’s help to bestow on future generations an unalienable right to pursue their private visions of the good life, he was merely securing the ultimate celebrity endorsement for his own socially constructed discourse on a highly debatable text. Like life and liberty, happiness has almost always been contested in practice. The struggle to define what that basic promise means, who says so, and who will enjoy its blessings inevitably produces one hegemony or another as surely as there will always be winners, losers, and lots of people somewhere in between. Writing and rewriting American history are acts of mythmaking that contribute profoundly to this never-ending contest between rival traditions and conflicting values. Somebody’s hegemony always prevails, however short-lived. Better the progressives’ than someone else’s.

So the good guys need historians’ help. They need historical precedents to bolster their confidence that greater social diversity will not end in the disintegration of American institutions any more than the federal union was overturned by sectionalism, slavery, religious strife, or the influx of ethnic immigrants at earlier times in our history.

By the same token, those whose scholarship qualifies them to be the historical narrators in whom the public is eager to place its trust have got to wake up and smell the coffee. It is time for scholars to get back in touch with real audiences. Ordinary history learners have no use for self-righteous social historians who dismiss government and politics as irrelevant or irredeemable. They have no sympathy for separatists and neosegregationists who will not wade into the mainstream. They carry no brief for those whose tender sensibilities cannot withstand the hard knocks that democracy dishes out. They have no truck with purveyors of bankrupt nineteenth-century ideologies. They have exhausted their patience for prissy armchair theorists who believe all truth to be man-made, but then will not make up their own minds which myth to get behind. Women and men who take time to read books about history, watch it on television, and visit history museums expect it to add up to something. What they want is a candid, coherent, inclusive American history narrative that tells them how such an assortment of fractious people has nevertheless made and remade the nation that we still all call home.

I have no quarrel with the premises that underlie the current cultural debate. Truth is open to multiple interpretations. Discourse is always a product of the discoursers’ culture, which is to say, their history. Today’s fashionable deconstructivists correctly remind us that all choices are equal—hypothetically. They conveniently forget that culture itself never is. Culture is inescapably the accumulated creation of countless choices already made.

That translates as ancestor worship among many traditional peoples. Not with us. Running all through the culture of American democracy is a vision of something better, something imaginable but not yet accomplished, something still to be shared more widely, justly, and generously. The practice of history in a free society ultimately serves this perpetual promise of improvement. Historians prepare people for change. They show them their unmade choices in historical perspective.

Students of material culture can contribute mightily to this enterprise. No one has spent more time studying the creature comforts that have always been central to Americans’ ideal of happiness. Conversely, no one occupies a better position to understand the sharp privations that have been suffered by those who were denied their piece of the American dream.

Most students of material culture are not yet accustomed to regard-
ing objects collected by museums or recorded in the field as artifacts produced in the ongoing struggle for human rights—either as the instruments of people’s betterment, the symbols of their individual and collective achievements, or the stigmata of their humiliation. Our blindness in this regard is restricting. We must teach ourselves to recognize the liberating force that comes from access to material goods. When we do, we will be surprised to see how effectively we can translate the epic of American nationhood into the commonplace experiences of those who have been the real nationmakers. Great events always and ultimately have intimate consequences. After the votes have been counted, the armies disbanded, the lunch counters desegregated, the juries dismissed, and the prisons emptied, ordinary people go back home to their everyday lives, but with a difference. Their struggle, if successful, has changed the conditions and dimensions of their daily existence. Historians of material culture must not neglect to tell us how. A materialistic people wants to know what palpable improvements freedom, justice, equality, opportunity, and dignity have made in the lives of those who sought and won them. For others not so fortunate, how has the continued frustration of their hopes made the bad old ways seem even more intolerable? The real mainsprings that drive change in a secular democracy are ultimately to be found in these personal and homely pleasures of everyday life or in the keen disappointment of their denial.

What might the study of material culture look like if it were told as a story of the country’s seesaw struggle to enlarge or limit the promise of plenty? So far, there are no models to follow—no prototypes, no exemplars, no canon. The third section of Gordon Wood’s book *The Radicalism of the American Revolution* describes how such a story might open. He argues that the New Republic discovered its greatness “by creating a prosperous free society belonging to obscure people with their workaday concerns and their pecuniary pursuits of happiness—common people with their common interests in making money and getting ahead.” But, of course, we cannot count Wood as a historian of material culture because—gosh!—what does he know about artifacts? The same goes for a few other written-record historians who have explored the synergy among abundance, democracy, and reform going back as far as David Potter’s *People of Plenty* and Daniel Boorstin’s *The Democratic Experience*, or published as recently as Alan Dawley’s *Struggles for Justice*.16 These authors explain how Americans’ material well-being has diminished social differences and thereby made any remaining class or racial distinctions seem doubly unfair and discriminatory. But again, useful as this insight might be, the books themselves lack the authority that students of material culture reserve for scholarship grounded on the evidence of artifacts.

So, without a dependable guide to show us how personal possessions can be interpreted to reveal the dialectic between justice and plenty, I must invent one. It need not be cut entirely from whole cloth. Here on paper I can rearrange the objects and rewrite the labels that already appear in a popular and successful permanent exhibition at the National Museum of American History. I can modify a pretty good exhibit into one that illustrates my proposition even better.

“A More Perfect Union: Japanese Americans and the United States Constitution” was organized to commemorate the bicentennial of the Constitution in 1987.17 The exhibition takes museum visitors back, as news anchor John Chancellor explains in a videotaped introduction, “to one of those times in American history” when the balance between individual rights and the defense of society “was upset by fear and racial prejudice. This is the story of a group of Americans who suffered a great wrong.” The injured group was the community of naturalized and native-born Japanese Americans living on the West Coast in 1941. The great wrong was their forcible internment in concentration camps.


17“A More Perfect Union: Japanese Americans and the United States Constitution,” National Museum of American History, Smithsonian Institution (permanent exhibition opened on Oct. 1, 1987); Roger Kennedy, director, who decided that an exhibition on this painful episode in American history would make a fitting observance of the bicentennial; Tom Crouch, Edward Eells, and Harold Langley, curators; Jennifer Lock, project assistant; Roger Daniels (University of Cincinnati) and citizens advisory panel, historians; Dru Colbert and Jana Justan, designers; Selma Thomas, video exhibits. There was no catalogue, but a brochure was available in the gallery. The exhibition was reviewed in the *Washington Post* (October 1, 1987); *New York Times* (October 2, 1987); and a *Winterthur Portfolio* forum on social responsibility in history museums exhibits (Winter 1989). The American Library Association reorganized the show as a traveling exhibition in 1996.
camps on direct orders from Washington, following the attack on Pearl Harbor.

The flagrant violation of their constitutionally guaranteed civil rights provides the dramatic tension for a show that otherwise celebrates the decency, fortitude, and patriotism of these abused citizens. The curators have told their story as a collection of shorter stories. In all of them, Japanese men and women who embraced the values of their adopted country discover some of its incongruous and contradictory realities. Industrious immigrants are exploited for their cheap labor by rapacious employers. Enterprising shopkeepers are shut down by the prejudice of former customers. Caring families and close communities are uprooted and trucked off to barbed-wire compounds in the desert by officials who have sworn to uphold every citizen’s Fourteenth Amendment right to due process and equal protection of the law. Patriotic volunteers, many from the camps, enlist in the U.S. Army and are assigned to the segregated 442nd Regiment, a unit more decorated at the war’s end than any other of its size. As separate episodes or as one compelling narrative, the exhibition already does a good job explaining how irreconcilable antagonisms are always driving American society from one unstable equilibrium to another.

“A More Perfect Union” is a wordy show, befitting a meditation on the world’s oldest written constitution. But the story it tells was no abstraction to the internees themselves. The hardships they experienced and their personal feelings of bewilderment, shame, disillusionment, anger, resignation, and rebellion are acknowledged throughout the exhibition, mostly in long label copy and even longer videotaped interviews. Artifacts and images—and there are lots of both—support this text. They set scenes, provide illustrations, and punctuate the written narrative.

What if we were to give these same exhibited objects juicer parts? What if we cast them not as extras but as protagonists at the center of the action, thereby emphasizing the extent to which material things often give definition and reality to Americans’ sense of justice and well-being? The show already sets up the before-and-after contrast that provides the dramatic structure for most stories about civil rights struggles. So, I need only rearrange and relabel some of the artifacts in the exhibition to demonstrate that pragmatic Americans are used to reckoning democracy in terms of things they can touch, own, and feel. As one

internee remembered later, “I knew in my heart that it was wrong—the liberty we were being deprived of. I didn’t know until I actually got into the camp what it meant.”

A sparsely furnished barracks room from one of the camps is the centerpiece of the Smithsonian show. It deserves a closer look than the once-over that most visitors give it now. In my show visitors would be encouraged to examine its contents very closely. The government-issue furnishings and personal possessions have intimate stories to tell because they literally became the instruments of the internees’ disgrace, their pride, their memories, and their faith that ultimately justice would be done.

Scene One—“Frozen Inside.” Tacky plywood barracks, army blanket partitions, and metal bunk beds affronted many camp residents’ sensibilities and dishonored the hard-won success that generations of Japanese American families had achieved in raising their standard of living by 1942. Photographs in the current installation testify to the modest but solid gains that many had made since their parents or grandparents came to California as well as their willingness to adopt American customs. The battered trunks and suitcases into which the evacuees hastily stuffed a few useful and precious personal belongings are inadequate reminders of everything else their owners were forced to leave behind. My exhibition would give visitors a fuller glimpse of Japanese Americans at home before their deportation, if only as a contrast to the material privation they soon encountered at the “relocation centers.” Those physical hardships took a psychological toll on some. “I think I’ve been pretending it really wasn’t as bad as it really was,” said one woman after seeing the exhibition. “We lived there and just existed from one day to another. It was only much later I discovered I had frozen inside.” Ugliness imposed by force is an act of brutality that, in this woman’s case, she said, “turned [my heart] to stone.”


19 May Ishimoto also told the Post reporter that the “barracks rebuilt at the Smithsonian looks too comfortable, too pleasant. . . . The floor boards should have been made of green wood that contracted to leave wide cracks through which bugs and dust flew in. And the furniture—few internees had such solid and attractive pieces.” Nonetheless, she found the exhibit “distressingly accurate.” That impression is confirmed by period photographs displayed in the exhibit (May Ishimoto, as told to Elizabeth Kastor, “Remembrance of Sorrows Past.”)
Scene Two—"Spotless Reputations." On the other hand, their miserable surroundings challenged many to make physical improvements against formidable odds. Again, the reconstructed barracks repay careful examination. The room looks clean and tidy. A mop in the corner and a dustpan on the hearth were used three or more times a day (an audio program explains) to sweep up the blowing sand and dust that forever shifted through the walls and floors despite all attempts to plug the cracks with old newspapers.

There are civilizing touches here and there too. Frilly curtains drape the windows. Freshly laundered and crisply ironed children's shirts and blouses hang in a little board-and-batten closet in the corner. Decency and dignity are preserved in such small details when denied other forms of expression.

Scene Three—"Homemade Memories." The all-purpose barracks room is furnished with sturdy tables, benches, a chest of drawers, a desk, and a painted trunk, all made (visitors are told) by an inmate who was formerly a cabinetmaker. A nearby label explains: "Pride and craftsmanship are obvious in many pieces of furniture manufactured in the camps. Using borrowed or homemade tools and scrap lumber, artisans confined to the camps kept their skills alive and made life more comfortable for their families."

Practice and comfort cannot be the whole story. Camp-made objects seen elsewhere in the exhibition, including paper lanterns, painted fans, shell jewelry, and decorative wall panels, resolutely assert Japanese aesthetics and design. The current show misses a chance here. Mine would explore how such nonverbal cultural mementos honored the traditions of a nation then at war with the United States and enhanced the ethnic self-esteem of the detainees, whose words and actions were otherwise closely monitored for the slightest hint of disloyalty.

Scene Four—"Pledge Allegiance." Objects are subtle communicators of their makers' and users' complicated loyalties. Pride in their ethnic heritage did not prevent Americans of Japanese descent from embracing Western customs and culture with even greater enthusiasm. The ultimate message of the 1987 exhibition was stated unequivocally in words painted across the window of a Los Angeles grocery store by its soon-to-be-deported proprietor: "I AM AN AMERICAN." That sentiment is seen in other images and artifacts as well: snapshots of a Japanese laborer in cowboy duds, kids playing baseball, youngsters in Boy Scout uniforms, a school girl's valentine, and the metals and ribbons awarded to Japanese American soldiers decorated for service and bravery. Ironically, even the camp barracks were places where the inmates celebrated their adopted heritage. Observant visitors to the Smithsonian installation see evidence that they played pop records on an old Victrola. Colored, paper chains festooned from walls and windows heralded the approach of an American-style Christmas.

Symbols spoke louder than words for these forgiving American citizens whose rights had been abridged. Nothing makes that clearer than a videotaped dialogue between a Japanese American father and daughter who "view" the reconstructed barracks room through a screen door in the rear wall of the exhibit.

The father reminisces: "Your uncle Harry joined the Army. He sent me his 44th patch to put on my Boy Scout uniform."

A Boy Scout!" his daughter exclaims. "I can't believe you were ever a Boy Scout! Especially at Manzanar!"

"Oh, it was very important to me. I had my own uniform just like my older brother Henry. I had badges, and I carried the flag on Memorial Day."

"The flag? At Manzanar?"

"Well, we were very patriotic Americans. I was born in this country. My grandparents were born here. We did everything we could to help win the war!"36

Words and even laws sometimes fail in the struggle to widen human freedom. Those are times when objects and images often come to hand. Their idiom releases powers that transcend language. They make injustice sensory; they signal solidarity; they build confidence and inspire courage; they rebuke the unjust; they reward the victorious; and then eventually and inevitably the spoils of victory weight the scales that sooner or later upset the balance of forces in society again. The pursuit of happiness is the sacred narrative that runs throughout our American history.

Its story can be told compellingly and concretely. Little by little, material culture historians are discovering how they too can help. A master craftsman at Colonial Williamsburg, a man who employs eigh-

36Played by actors Sab Shimono, a third-generation Californian who was incarcerated at a camp in Colorado at the age of four, and Nikki Harada, a fourth-generation American born in 1976. Script by Tom Crouch and Selma Thomas.
teenth-century technology to manufacture objects whose meaning he then interprets to twentieth-century audiences, recently observed that that outdoor museum's central theme, "Becoming Americans," is, in his words, "the right one. It's what people really come here to find out about. The struggle to be free and equal, the ongoing revolution, is the most important story we have to tell. It's good that we are not abdicating the responsibility to use Williamsburg as a vehicle for a story of nation building, rather than relapsing into provincial antiquarianism." He saw clearly that "national themes are embedded in the local experience we have to present [and] the work we are doing here." Wisdom from a man who labors all day in a leather apron is not lost on museum visitors who drop by his shop. They watch him work, they hear him talk about the life and hopes of a foundryman, and they go away understanding that he molds more than brass in his rustic classroom.

American Material Culture
The Shape of the Field

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Contents

Shaping the Field: The Multidisciplinary Perspectives of Material Culture
Ann Smart Martin
Historian
Colonial Williamsburg Foundation
J. Ritchie Garrison
Associate Director, Museum Studies Program
Associate Professor of History, University of Delaware
Associate Professor, Office of Advanced Studies
Winterthur Museum, Garden & Library

American Difference Revisited: The Case of the American Axe
Gary Kulik
Deputy Director
Library and Academic Programs
Winterthur Museum, Garden & Library

The Bricoleur Revisited
Bernard L. Herman
Associate Professor
Department of Art History
University of Delaware

Material Culture as Rhetoric: "Animal Artifacts" as a Case Study
Katherine C. Grier
Assistant Professor
Department of History
University of Utah