

Methods and Theory of Material Culture Studies
History 6202, University of West Georgia
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Course Description

“A method based on the document is prejudiced; fated to neglect the majority of people, for they were non-literate and, within the boundaries of literacy, to neglect the majority of people, for they did not write. Even today in societies of almost universal literacy, it is a rare soul who bequeaths to future historians a written account of his thought... How can you study a society if you attend only to the expressions of a small and deviant class within the whole?”

Henry Glassie, *Folk Housing in Middle Virginia*

“Material culture is the study through artifacts of the beliefs—values, ideas, attitudes, and assumptions—of a particular community or society at a given time.”

Jules David Prown, “Mind in Matter”

“Material culture...is not culture but its product. Culture is socially transmitted rules for behavior, ways of thinking about and doing things... Material culture is...that sector of our physical environment that we modify through culturally determined behavior.”

James Deetz, *In Small Things Forgotten*

“The study of American material life is grounded in the concrete, interwoven reality of men’s and women’s environmental, economic, and cultural circumstances.”

Robert Blair St. George, *Material Life in America*

The phrase “material culture” is a broad one. Perhaps the simplest way to define the term is that material culture represents the “things” or the “stuff” which we create and use on a daily basis, the *material* products of a culture. These “things” could range from the clothes in your closet to the dishes in your kitchen, large and often-costly items such as our cars and homes to less-expensive mundane artifacts like pocket knives or even the contents of a kitchen trash can. Some artifacts might be stylish, but others much less so. Some might be readily available and mass-produced, while others might be heirlooms or hand-crafted items. Some artifacts denote our class and social status, while others help us to accomplish a specific goal or simply to have fun. Most importantly, material culture tells us about a place and a time, about the people who created or used the artifacts, about change over time. Just as we create material culture, so too are we shaped by the material culture that surrounds us. As folklorist Henry Glassie argues, material culture often reveals much about a past that is difficult to study in other ways.

But the field is full of challenges. How do we study material culture? Some scholars argue that the artifact can “speak,” but does it? How do we interpret what the artifact or the collection of artifacts says? How can material culture help us address some of the larger questions and issues that we face as historians? What are the limitations of using artifacts? What are the limits of their value? The study of material culture is an interdisciplinary undertaking that benefits from methods and theories from a range of disciplines.

This class will involve both readings in the field as well as an individual research project. First, we will explore the ways in which scholars from different disciplines have studied material culture by reading some of the work of leading practitioners in the field. I will ask you to assess the strengths and weaknesses of each scholar's approach, to evaluate the success of his or her work, and to identify his or her contributions to material culture studies. Second, each student will conduct an original research project utilizing material culture to study a historical topic. You must use primary sources, either actual artifacts or documents about material culture such as those used by scholars we have read. In addition to our classroom meeting times, we will schedule a field trip to the Goldworth Farm in Villa Rica to look at objects, including a parlor suite.

Learning Outcomes

1. Students will become familiar with the current scholarly literature about the methods and theories of studying material culture.
2. Students will be able to identify the methods by which scholars from different academic disciplines (e.g. history, anthropology, archaeology, folklore, art history, women's studies, history of technology, and cultural studies) analyze and utilize material culture in their studies.
3. Students will demonstrate the ability to analyze and interpret material culture orally and in writing.
4. Students will conduct original research utilizing artifacts or other primary sources related to material culture and will situate their research within the context of material culture scholarship.
5. Students will develop and support an argument and demonstrate clear analytical writing skills through the preparation of an essay that uses original primary sources.
6. Students will analyze how museums and other public history venues use and interpret material culture.

Course Readings

Since this is a graduate seminar, there will be considerable reading. All of the articles and essays are available on Electronic Reserve through Ingram Library. Once you find our class reserves page on the library website, you will need to use the password *culture* to access the readings.

Required books

- Cowan, Ruth Schwartz, *More Work for Mother: The Ironies of Household Technology from the Open Hearth to the Microwave*. New York: Basic Books, 1983. ISBN: 0-465—4732-7.
- Deetz, James, *In Small Things Forgotten: The Archaeology of Early American Life*. New York: Anchor Books, 1996. ISBN: 0-385-48399-6
- Grier, Katherine C., *Culture and Comfort: Parlor Making and Middle-Class Identity, 1850-1930*. Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1988. ISBN: 1-56098-716-2.
- Hill, Sarah, *Weaving New Worlds: Southeastern Cherokee Women and Their Basketry*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997. ISBN 0-8078-4650-3
- Krill, Rosemary Troy and Pauline K. Eversmann, *Early American Decorative Arts, 1620-1800*. Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press, 2000. ISBN 0-7425-0314-3.
- Marling, Karal Ann, *As Seen on TV: The Visual Culture of Everyday Life in the 1950s*. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard Press. ISBN: 0-674—4883-0
- Ulrich, Laurel Thatcher, *The Age of Homespun: Objects and Stories in the Creation of an American Myth*. New York: Vintage Books, 2001. ISBN: 0-679-76644-8

These additional books, the source of many of the essays in the syllabus, will be on two-hour reserve in the library.

Jules Prown, *American Artifacts: Essays in Material Culture*. ISBN: 0-87013-524-4. Michigan State University Press, 2000.

Henry Glassie, *Material Culture*. Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1999. ISBN: 0-253-33574-4.

Thomas J. Schlereth, ed., *Material Culture Studies in America*. Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press/AASLH, 1999. ISBN: 0-7619-9160-3. This book has an excellent bibliographical essay about material culture studies that may prove useful to you in your own research.

Robert Blair St. George, *Material Life in America, 1600-1860*. Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1988. 1-55553-020-6

Course Requirements

The course will emphasize readings and research, with approximately half of the course grade based on readings and related class discussions and half on the research project. There will be no exams.

Research paper (40% of final course grade)

Each student will write an original research paper about 15 pages in length on a topic of the student's choice. Whenever possible, I encourage you to consider using this paper as part of your thesis or thesis/project research. In considering your research project, you might think about a grouping of material culture or one single artifact and the questions or issues that these objects help you explore. Or you might come up with a question that you think you could answer using some type of material culture. Remember that the field of material culture is very inclusive; I encourage you to be as creative as you can in framing your project.

The research paper must be based on primary research. This research could include the *artifacts* themselves or it could involve *documents* that tell us about material culture of the past, such as wills or probate inventories, tax records, census data, popular magazines, Sears Catalogs, or other relevant types of records. You may utilize oral histories as a source for interpreting and analyzing the material culture in question. However, material culture must be at the core of your project. If you use artifacts in your analysis, please include photographs or other types of illustrations to illustrate what you are studying. If you use written documents, you might consider ways in which you could organize your data for the reader or perhaps relate what you are finding in the written records to the artifacts themselves (see Sweeney's article on New England furniture for an example).

The paper must also incorporate **secondary sources** to place your research into a broader context of material culture and history scholarship, both in methodology and in the topic under discussion. Students should consult at least eight secondary sources. You may utilize up to three secondary sources from the readings, but you must also locate five additional secondary sources relating to your topic. Always consider what contribution your work makes to the field and be sure to highlight that contribution in the introduction and conclusion of your paper.

Each research paper must include footnotes or endnotes and a complete bibliography of both primary and secondary sources and must follow the *Chicago Manual of Style* in the format and any other matters of style.

Please note that the paper that you turn in must be written specifically for this class. You may not "double-dip" by writing a paper for this class that you also plan to use for another class this semester.

Research paper proposal (10% of final course grade)

To be sure that you get started on your research paper early in the semester, students will submit a two- to three-page research prospectus on **February 29**. This prospectus should include (1) the question that you hope to ask, (2) a description of the primary sources you plan to use, (3) a list of *at least five* secondary

sources related to your project, and (4) the significance of your proposed topic. Please be sure to explain what your research contributes to the field.

Class participation (20% of final course grade)

Since this is a graduate seminar, students are expected to read the required assignments in *advance* of the class meeting and to contribute to the class discussion. All of us will benefit if everyone comes to class prepared. Most significantly, *you* will have a better class experience. I know some of you are naturally quieter than others, but I expect every student to make at least one contribution to class discussion each week and that no one student will dominate the discussion.

As part of your class participation requirement, students will bring in an example of material culture and interpret that artifact with the help of other classmates. Each student will be assigned a specific class date to bring in an artifact.

Attendance is also very important. As a seminar, this class will emphasize discussion, rather than lecture, and this interaction would be impossible to “make up.” More than two absences will lower your final course grade.

Weekly written assignments (30% of course grade)

Throughout the course, you will be expected to prepare a written, two- to three-page, word-processed response paper to the readings every week. In these response papers, please be sure to assess the readings. What do the author’s contribute to the field? What are his or her methods? What are the strengths and weaknesses of their approaches? These comment sheets help me to understand what you are learning. There are a few weeks listed in which I have provided more details regarding the

Students are expected to turn in the weekly response papers even if s/he is not in class. Please submit any such papers on Course Den by the beginning of the class in which they are due. Please do not send any papers by email.

Additional Class Etiquette

1. Plagiarism will not be tolerated. Any plagiarized work will result in an “F” for the final class grade. Please review the AHA statement on plagiarism, available on the UWG History Department website, available at <http://www.westga.edu/~history/statementonplagiarism.pdf>
2. Cell phones are not allowed to be out on your desk or otherwise visible during the class period, unless you have requested prior approval from the instructor due to a family situation or emergency. Any cell phones that are visible, even if not in use, will be collected.
3. Computers are not necessary for class. If you feel that you need to use a computer, please clear this with the instructor in advance.
4. Our class page on Course Den will serve as the place for me to post additional guidelines for research papers, updates to the schedule or readings list, and any other announcements. All students are expected to check Course Den on a regular basis. Failure to read any announcements on Course Den does not relieve students of any responsibility in following these announcements or changes.

Class Schedule

Please note that this schedule is subject to change based on our progress in the class and on student interest. Any changes to the readings or weekly response papers will be announced in class and posted on Course Den each Friday. All students should learn how to use Course Den and check it on a regular basis. I will post any changes to the following week’s schedule by Friday at 5 p.m.

January 11: Class Introduction and Introduction to Material Culture

January 18: Material Culture and 9/11

View: *Objects and Memory*

To read more about this project, check out <http://objectsandmemory.org/about/About.htm>

Due: Please submit your ideas for your research project to Course Den by 8 p.m. today

January 25: Studying material culture

Cary Carson, "Doing History with Material Culture," in Ian Quimby, ed, *Material Culture and the Study of American Life* (New York: Norton, 1978), on electronic reserve

Ann Smart Martin and J. Ritchie Garrison, "Shaping the Field: The Multidisciplinary Perspectives of Material Culture," in *American Material Culture: The Shape of the Field* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1997), on electronic reserve

Jules Prown, "Mind in Matter: An Introduction to Material Culture Theory and Method" in Robert St. George, *Material Life in America, 1600-1860*, on electronic reserve

E. McClung Fleming, "Artifact Study: A Proposed Model" in Thomas J. Schlereth, *Material Culture Studies in America*, on electronic reserve

Jennifer L. Roberts, "Lubrifications on a Lava Lamp: Technocracy, Counterculture, and Containment in the American Sixties," in Prown and Haltman, *American Artifacts*, on electronic reserve

February 1: Material culture and social history

Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, *The Age of Homespun*. Come prepared to discuss her approach towards material culture and its use in historical research.

February 8: Archaeological and anthropological approaches

James Deetz, *In Small Things Forgotten: The Archaeology of Early American Life*.

Visit <http://etext.lib.virginia.edu/users/deetz/>, the "Plymouth Colony Archives"

Please look particularly at the probate records, which we will discuss in class.

This week's assignment: Drawing upon Deetz's book, please take three inventories from the website and analyze what they can tell us about seventeenth century New England

February 15: Style, connoisseurship, and "decorative arts": an art historical approach

"Interpreting Decorative Arts Objects" (chapter 1), "Looking at Objects," and "Understanding Style" (chapter 3) and read at least four of the later chapters (7-24) in Rosemary Troy Krill and Pauline K. Eversmann, *Early American Decorative Arts, 1620-1860*. Please be sure to read at least two chapters that describe specific styles and periods. Essays on electronic reserve, book will be on two-hour reserve

Charles F. Montgomery, "The Connoisseurship of Artifacts," in Schlereth, *Material Culture Studies in America*, on electronic reserve

This week's assignment: Select a book that describes "decorative arts" (e.g. furniture, ceramics, textiles, etc) and write a one- to two-page analysis of that author's methods and approach. You will likely find these types of books in the antiques section of the book store or library; some may take the form of a "coffee table" book. Bring your book to class as well.

February 22: Class, status, "refinement" and the consumer revolution in eighteenth century America

Kevin Sweeney, "Furniture and the Domestic Environment in Wethersfield, Connecticut, 1639-1800", in Robert St. George, *Material Life in America, 1600-1860*, on electronic reserve

Robert Blair St. George, "Artifacts of Regional Consciousness in the Connecticut River Valley, 1700-1780," in St. George, *Material Life in America, 1600-1860*, on electronic reserve

Richard Bushman, "Bodies and Minds," from *The Refinement of America: Persons, House, and Cities* (please focus especially on sections about clothing and foodways), on electronic reserve

Rodris Roth, "Tea-Drinking in Eighteenth-Century America: its Etiquette and Equipage" in Robert St. George, *Material Life in America, 1600-1860*, also on electronic reserve
One additional reading may be assigned—please check Course Den for this update

February 29: Folklore approaches

Henry Glassie, *Material Culture*, chapters 1-3, on electronic reserve
Michael Owen Jones, "Why Take a Behavioral Approach to Folk Objects?" in Steven Lubar and W. David Kingery, *History from Things: Essays on Material Culture*, on electronic reserve
Due: Research paper proposal

March 7: Ethnographic approaches to Material Culture

Sarah Hill, *Weaving New Worlds*

March 14: Popular culture and consumerism

Katherine Grier, *Culture and Comfort: Parlor Making and Middle-Class Identity, 1850-1930*
Jackson Lears, "Beyond Veblen: Rethinking Consumer Culture in America," in Simon Bronner, Ed., *Consuming Visions: Accumulation and Display of Goods in America, 1880-1920*, on electronic reserve;
Thomas J. Schlereth, "Country Stores, County Fairs, and Mail Order Catalogues: Consumption in Rural America," in Simon Bronner, Ed., *Consuming Visions: Accumulation and Display of Goods in America, 1880-1920*, on electronic reserve

March 21 Spring Break

March 28: Technology and material culture

Ruth Schwartz Cowan, *More Work for Mother*

April 4: Gender studies and material culture

Lisa Jacobson, "Heroes of the New Consumer Age: Imagining Boy Consumers," in Lisa Jacobson, *Raising Consumers: Children and the American Mass Market in the Early Twentieth Century*, on electronic reserve
Jane Dusselier, "Bonbons, Lemon Drops, and Oh Henry! Bars: Candy, Consumer Culture, and the Construction of Gender, 1895-1920," in Sherrie A. Inness, *Kitchen Culture in America*, on electronic reserve
Additional readings may be assigned

April 11: Modern Material Culture

Karal Ann Marling, *As Seen on TV: The Visual Culture of Everyday Life in 1950s America*

April 18: No class, work on research projects

April 25: Final discussions
Research Papers due