instructor: Jessica Sewell

course title: Studies in American Material Culture

institution: Boston University

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This course will introduce students to the study of material culture, the physical stuff that is part of human life. Material culture includes everything we make and use, from food and clothing to art and buildings. This course is organized into six sections, the first introducing the idea of material culture, and the other five following the life cycle of an object:

**Material:** Before an object becomes recognizable as such, it is a material. What are the natures of different materials? Why are objects made of the materials they are? How did these materials come to be used?

**Making:** How are objects made? How is the information about how to make them passed from person to person? How does the act of making affect the form of the object?

**Designing:** Why do objects have the form they do? What are the artistic, social, and economic factors that shape the form of objects?

**Selling:** How do objects change hands? How does material culture participate in the circulation of goods?

**Using:** How are objects used? What are the meanings and roles they have in people’s lives, and how are these sometimes different from what a maker, designer, or seller had in mind?
Requirements

The first requirement of the course is participation: doing the reading, coming to class, and participating in discussion. This will count for 5% of your final grade. Reading assignments need to be done on time, which means completing the reading before the lecture for which it has been assigned. Doing the reading will often be necessary for fully understanding the lectures and is a prerequisite for participating in discussion.

Each section of the class includes one assignment exploring an aspect of material culture. As we will be discussing these in class, it is essential that they be done on time. They are each worth 10% of the final grade.

There is a midterm exam, October 14, which is worth 15% of the final grade, and a final exam, which is worth 20% of the final grade.

For all assignments, you are required to follow the rules of style laid out in Turabian’s *A Manual for Writers of Term Papers, Theses, and Dissertations*, which has been ordered as a required book. It will tell you what you need to know about margins, spacing, footnotes, punctuation, etc. Use it.

All work done for this class must be in accordance with the academic conduct code, available online at http://www.bu.edu/cas/academics/programs/conductcode.html.
Books

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

**Required**

**Recommended**
Schedule of Course Meetings

**Week 1:**
Sept. 3: Introduction

Sept. 5: What is Material Culture?

**Week 2**
Sept. 8: What is Material Culture? Take 2
   Readings: Dell Upton, “The City as Material Culture” in Yentsch and Beaudry, eds., The Art and Mystery of Historical Archaeology (Boca Raton: CRC Press, 1989); Igor Kopytoff, “The Cultural Biography of Things” in Appadurai

Sept. 10: Form and Culture
   Readings: Deetz, “Remember Me as You Pass By”

Sept. 12: Discussion: Results of assignment 1, due in class
   **Assignment 1:** Choose a simple object. Using the Prown article as a guide, follow the steps of description, deduction, and speculation. Be as thorough as possible in your sensory interactions with the object. (2-5 pages)

**Materials**

**Week 3**
Sept. 15: The Science of Materials

Sept. 17: Wood

Sept. 19: Textiles

**Week 4**
Sept. 22: Plastic and Synthetics
   Readings: Meikle, “Nylon”
Sept. 24: Discussion: Results of assignment 2, due in class

**Assignment 2:** Revisit the object you used for assignment 1. Figure out what material or materials the object is made of and speculate as to why. This will require some research into the material’s properties, meanings, production, and history. Where does it come from? How is it produced? What are the other uses it has had? (3-6 pages)

**Making Things**

Sept. 26: Making Things in a Folk Tradition

**Week 5**
Sept. 29: Cooking

Oct. 1: Making Things as a Hobby
  Readings: Gelber, “Crafts, Tools, and Gender in the Nineteenth Century”

Oct. 3: Making Things as a Hobby, Take 2

**Week 6**
Oct. 6: Home Production
  Readings: Ulrich, “An Unfinished Stocking”

Oct. 8: Factory Production
  Readings: Forty, “Design and Mechanization”

Oct. 10: Discussion: Results of assignment 3, due in class

**Assignment 3:** Find someone who makes something. Have that person teach you how. Interview the person about the process of making. How did they learn how to make this thing? Who did they learn from? How did their knowledge and skills change? What meaning does the act of making hold for them? What traces of the making are readable in the thing itself (how can you tell how it was made and how well)? (3-6 pages)

**Week 7**
Oct. 14 (Tuesday with Monday schedule): Midterm
Designing Things

Oct. 15: Form Follows Function

Oct. 17: Form Follows Culture
Readings: Ames, “Death in the Dining Room”

Week 8
Oct. 20: Design and Difference
Readings: Forty, “Differentiation in Design”

Oct. 22: Design and Gender
Readings: Scharff, “Gender and Genius: The Auto Industry and Femininity” in Martinez and Ames

Oct. 24: Design to Sell
Readings: Forty, “Images of Progress”

Week 9
Oct. 27: Discussion: Results of assignment 4, due in class
Assignement 4: Choose a type of object (ideally the type used for assignment 1). Compare two to four objects of that type, each made by a different manufacturer. Analyze the designs of the objects in relation to function, cultural meanings, differentiation, and the market. (3-6 pages)

Selling Things

Oct. 29: Consumption
Readings: Veblen, “Conspicuous Consumption”

Oct. 31: Advertising and the Creation of Desire

Week 10
Nov. 3: Marketing Difference
Readings: Dusselier, “Bon Bons, Lemon Drops and Oh Henry! Bars” in Inness

Nov. 5: Shops
Nov. 7: Shopping

**Week 11**
Nov. 10: No class, Veterans Day

Nov. 12: Home Shopping

Nov. 14: Discussion: Results of assignment 5, due in class
   **Assignment 5:** Choose an object (ideally the object used for assignment 1). Analyze the way the object is marketed. What are the aspects of the object that are emphasized in the marketing? To what extent is its use or its cultural meanings emphasized? Who are imagined as its users? Now interview one or more people who own this object. Why did they buy it? What aspects of the object are most important to them? How does this relate to the way the object was sold to them?

**Using Things**

**Week 12**
Nov. 17: Collecting Things
   Readings: Gelber, “Collectors”

Nov. 19: Everyday Uses of Things

Nov. 21: Objects and Meaning
   Readings: Romines, “Putting Things in Order: The Domestic Aesthetic of Laura Ingalls Wilder’s Little House Books” in Martinez and Ames

**Week 13**
Nov. 24: Changing Meanings

Nov. 26 and 28: No class, Thanksgiving

**Week 14**
Dec. 1: Reusing Things
Dec 3: Remaking Things
Readings: Brenda Bright, “‘Heart Like a Car’: Hispano/Chicano Culture in Northern New Mexico” American Ethnologist 25(4) (1998)

Dec. 5: Discarding Things
Readings: William Rathje, “Garbage and History” in Rubbish!

Week 15
Dec. 8: Discussion: Results of assignment 6, due in class
Assignment 6: Choose a simple object (ideally the object used for assignment 1) that is commonly used by people with whom you share a living space or otherwise encounter regularly. Observe how these people use the object. Do they use it in the same way it is designed or marketed to be used? How often do they use it? In what circumstances? After having observed them, interview them about their use and relationship to the object. Does it carry any particular meanings for them? If so, how do these fit with the dominant meanings of this object?

Dec 10: Discussion of final exam