Seminar in Material Culture
American and New England Studies, Art History
Boston University
Fall 2008

AM/AH 867
Mondays 1-4
226 Bay State Road, Room 110

Professor: Jessica Sewell
Office Hours:
   Monday 4-5 and Wednesday 1:30-2:30 in Room 207, 226 Bay State Road
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This course introduces the theory and practice of 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. We will read a wide range of contemporary scholarship on material culture from a range of disciplines, including anthropology, history, sociology, art and architectural history, and cultural studies. The course focuses particularly on American material culture and on material culture in the context of mass consumption, but places it in a larger context of international studies in material culture and material culture in all times and places.

Requirements

The primary requirement of the course is participation: doing the reading, coming to class, and participating in discussion; it will be worth 40% of your grade for the course. You will write short, informal weekly reaction papers to each set of readings, which you will post on a discussion board on the courseinfo website by Sunday night. These informal papers are not graded, but are required, and will help you fully engage in discussion. For the first several weeks you will also have four short assignments, due in class, in which you will be exploring different aspects of material culture. Each of these is worth 5% of your grade for the course. At the end of the semester, you will write a research paper on an object or a small group of related objects, which you will present to your colleagues in preliminary form in class December 1 or 8. A proposal and preliminary bibliography is due October 27. The final paper is due December 15. The paper project (including your proposal, bibliography, and presentation) is worth 40% of your grade for the course. For all assignments, you are required to follow the rules of style laid out in The Chicago Manual of Style, which has been ordered as a required book. It will tell you what you need to know about margins, spacing, footnotes, punctuation, etc.
Books

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

Required


Recommended

Schedule of Course Meetings

Week 1: Sept. 8  Introductions

Week 2: Sept. 15  What is Material Culture?
Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, “Why We Need Things” in Lubar and Kingery
Henry Glassie, “Material Culture” in Glassie
P.M. Graves-Brown, “Introduction” in Matter, Materiality, and Modern Culture.
Jacques Macquet, “Objects as Instruments, Objects as Signs,” in Lubar and Kingery
Dell Upton, “The City as Material Culture” in Yentsch and Beaudry, eds., The Art and Mystery of Historical Archaeology (Boca Raton: CRC Press, 1989)

Week 3: Sept. 22  Form and Style
Margaret Conkey and Christine Hastorf, “Introduction,” in The Uses of Style in Archaeology
Margaret Conkey, “Experimenting with Style in Archaeology: Some Historical and Theoretical Issues” in The Uses of Style in Archaeology
James Deetz, In Small Things Forgotten
Rita P. Wright, “Technological Styles: Transforming a Natural Material Into a Cultural Object” in Lubar and Kingery

Assignment 1: Choose a simple object. Using Prown’s “Mind in Matter” as a guide, follow Prown’s steps of description, deduction, and speculation. Concentrate especially on description and deduction. Try to use all your senses in your engagement with the object.

Week 4: Sept. 29  Materials
Robert Friedel, ‘Some Matters of Substance’ in Lubar and Kingery
Ettlinger, “Baking Soda” and “Phosphates” in Twinkie, Deconstructed
Hadley, “The Nature of Wood” in Understanding Wood
Jeffrey L. Meikle, American Plastic: A Cultural History, Intro, Ch 1-3, 7

Assignment 2: Figure out what material or materials the object you used for assignment 1 is made of. Research this material’s properties, source, production, and meanings. Speculate as to why this material was used for this object.
Week 5: Oct. 6  
**Making Things**

Simon Bronner, “Grasping Things” in *Grasping Things*  
Tim Ingold, “Making Culture and Weaving the World” in *Matter, Materiality, and Modern Culture*, 50-71  
Adrian Forty, “Design and Mechanization” in *Objects of Desire*  
Steven Gelber, “Section 3: Handicrafts,” in *Hobbies*  

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)?

Week 6: Oct 14 (Tuesday imitating a Monday)  
**Design and Designers**

Henry Petroski, “Form Follows Failure” and “From Pins to Paper Clips” in *The Evolution of Useful Things*  
Adrian Forty, ”Images of Progress” and “The First Industrial Designers” in *Objects of Desire*  
Harvey Molotch, *Where Stuff Comes From*, chapters 1-4

Assignment 4: Choose a type of object (ideally the type used for assignment 1). Compare two or more different objects of that type. Analyze the designs of the objects in relation to function, cultural meanings, differentiation, and the market.

Week 7: Oct 20  
**Selling Things**

Jane Dusselier, “Bon Bons, Lemon Drops and Oh Henry! Bars” in Inness  
Nicky Gregson and Louise Crewe, “Constituting Difference”  
Dick Hebdige, “Object as Image: The Italian Scooter Cycle” in Hebdige, *Hiding in the Light*
Week 8: Oct 27  

**Using Things**

Iain Borden, “Urban Compositions” in *Skateboarding, Space, and the City* (Oxford: Berg, 2001)
Kathleen Franz, “What Consumers Wanted” in *Tinkering*
Nicky Gregson and Louise Crewe, “Transformations”
Colleen McDannell, “Piety, Art, Fashion: The Religious Object” in *Material Christianity*

**Proposal due for final paper**

Week 9: Nov. 3  

**Collecting Things**

Nathan Scott Epley, “Of PEZ and Perfect Price: Sniping, Collecting Cultures, and Democracy on eBay” in Hillis and Petit, eds., *Everyday eBay*
Steven Gelber, “The Collectible Object” and “Collectors” in *Hobbies*
Victor Margolin, Culture is Everywhere: An Introduction to the Museum of Corn-temporary Art” in *Culture is Everywhere*
E. Bruce Robertson, “Curiosity Cabinets, Museums, and Universities,” in Sheehy, ed., *Cabinet of Curiosities*
Zoe Trodd, “Reading eBay: Hidden Stores, Subjective Stories, and a People’s History of the Archive,” in Hillis and Petit, eds., *Everyday eBay*

Week 10: Nov 10  

**Commodities and Consumer Culture**

Susan Strasser, “Having and Disposing in the New Consumer Culture” in *Waste and Want*
Week 11: Nov 17  **Body/Self**

Richard Bushman, “Bodies and Minds” in *The Refinement of America*
*Add another article on the body? Or possibly posture and power from Ames?*

Week 12: Nov. 24 **Difference**

Kenneth Ames, “Death in the Dining Room” in *Death in the Dining Room*
Adrian Forty, “Differentiation in Design”
Rebecca Ginsburg, “The View from the Back Step: White Children Learn about Race in Johannesburg’s Suburban Homes” in Gutman and de Connick-Smith, eds., *Designing Modern Childhoods*
Marina Moskowitz, “The Standard of Living” and “The Standard of Etiquette” in *The Standard of Living*

Week 13: Dec. 1 **Student Presentations**

Week 14: Dec. 8 **Student Presentations**