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**instructor:** Jessica Sewell  
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# Studies in American Material Culture

American and New England Studies, Art History

Boston University

Fall 2008

AM/AH 367  
MWF, 10-11  
CAS Room 314

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Office Hours:

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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

- Forty, Adrian. *Objects of Desire: Design and Society from Wedgwood to IBM*. New York: Thames and Hudson, 1992 (reprint edition).
- Gelber, Steven M. *Hobbies: Leisure and the Culture of Work in America*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1999.
- Turabian, Kate et. al. *A Manual for Writers of Term Papers, Theses, and Dissertations, Seventh Edition*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007.

### Recommended

- Amato, Ivan. *Stuff: The Materials the World is Made Of*. New York: Basic Books, 1997.
- Ames, Kenneth. *Death in the Dining Room and Other Tales of Victorian Culture*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1992.
- Appadurai, Arjun ed. *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986.
- Deetz, James. *In Small Things Forgotten: The Archaeology of Early American Life, Expanded and Revised Edition*. New York: Anchor Books, 1996.
- Glassie, Henry. *Material Culture*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999.
- Inness, Sherrie A., ed. *Kitchen Culture in America*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001.
- Lubar, Steven, and W. David Kingery, eds. *History From Things: Essays on Material Culture*. Washington: Smithsonian Institution, 1993.
- Martinez, Katherine, and Kenneth Ames, eds. *The Material Culture of Gender/The Gender of Material Culture*. Winterthur, DE: Henry Francis DuPont Winterthur Museum, 1997.
- Meikle, Jeffrey. *American Plastic: A Cultural History*. New Brunswick: Rutgers, 1997.
- Petroski, Henry. *The Evolution of Useful Things*. New York: Vintage, 1992.
- William Rathje, *Rubbish!: The Archaeology of Garbage* (Tucson: The University of Arizona Press, 2001(orig. 1992))
- Ulrich, Laurel Thatcher. *The Age of Homespun*. New York: Knopf, 2001.
- Veblen, Thorstein. *The Theory of the Leisure Class*. New York: Penguin, 1994 (1899).

## Schedule of Course Meetings

### Week 1:

Sept. 3: Introduction

Sept. 5: What is Material Culture?

Readings: Henry Glassie, "Material Culture" in Glassie; Jules Prown, "Mind in Matter," *Winterthur Portfolio*, Vol. 17, No. 1. (Spring 1982), 1-19.

### 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

Readings: Amato, "The Secret Architecture of Stuff" in *Stuff*.

Sept. 17: Wood

Readings: Jennifer Anderson, "Nature's Currency: The Atlantic Mahogany Trade and the Commodification of Nature in the Nineteenth Century," in *Early American Studies*, Spring 2004, 47-80.

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

Readings: Bronner, "Grasping Things"; Jones, "Why Take a Behavioral Approach to Folk Objects?" in Lubar and Kingery

### **Week 5**

Sept. 29: Cooking

Readings: Luce Giard, "Gesture Sequences" and "Rules of the Art" in de Certeau et. al, *The Practice of Everyday Life, Vol. 2* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998)

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

Readings: Mary Anne Beecher, "The Mythical Making Martha," *American Studies* 42:2 (Summer 2001), 113-124.

### **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

Readings: Walter Gropius, “Principles of Bauhaus Production,” and Henry van de Velde, “Forms,” in Ulrich Conrads, ed., *Programs and Manifestoes on 20<sup>th</sup>-Century Architecture* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1970); Petroski, “Form Follows Failure” and “From Pins to Paper Clips”

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

**Assignment 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

Readings: Stuart Ewen, “Mobilizing the Instincts” and “Advertising: Civilizing the Self” in *Captains of Consciousness: Advertising and the Social Roots of the Consumer Culture* (New York: Basic Books, 1976)

### **Week 10**

Nov. 3: Marketing Difference

Readings: Dusselier, “Bon Bons, Lemon Drops and Oh Henry! Bars” in Inness

Nov. 5: Shops

Readings: Abelson, “The World of the Store,” in *When Ladies Go A-Thieving* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989)

Nov. 7: Shopping

Readings: Paco Underhill, "The Sensual Shopper" in *Why We Buy* (New York: Touchstone, 1999)

### **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

Readings: Hess, "Domestic Interiors in Northern New Mexico" *Heresies* 11 (1981)

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

Readings: Iain Borden, "Urban Compositions" in *Skateboarding, Space, and the City* (Oxford: Berg, 2001)

Nov. 26 and 28: No class, Thanksgiving

### **Week 14**

Dec. 1: Reusing Things

Readings: Nicky Gregson and Louise Crewe, "Transformations: Commodity Recovery, Redefinition, Divestment and Re-enchantment" in *Second-Hand Cultures* (Oxford: Berg, 2003)

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