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# American Artifacts

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## Essays in Material Culture

edited by

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## Introduction

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THE ESSAYS COLLECTED in this volume, intended for both scholars and students, exemplify the methodology they share, familiarly known as Prownian analysis, the history and theoretical underpinnings of which are elucidated by Jules Prown himself in the Preface and opening contribution to this volume. These essays share, as well, a spirit of imaginative intervention in the study of history. They constitute a sort of pedagogic sampler, an anthology of *essays* in the strictly etymological sense: experiments in or elaborations of a rigorously practical (as opposed to purely theoretical) approach to understanding things. At the crux of this book, underlying each contribution and informing the collective enterprise, lies a shared concern with the articulation of historical significance and its production. What questions are most fruitful to ask in one's work with an object and how might one best go about asking them? Whereas scholars will find value in particular historical interpretations proposed by contributors concerning a teapot, card table, cigarette lighter, cellarette, telephone, quilt, money box, corset, parlor stove, lava lamp, footbridge, locket, food mill, or Argand lamp, students will find value principally in learning from the models that these readings offer of how such interpretation can be carried out.

While only some of culture takes material form, the part that does records the shape and imprint of otherwise more abstract, conceptual, or even metaphysical aspects of that culture that they quite literally embody. These are the *objects* we as historians in the field of Material Culture seek to understand. Our investigations—analysis followed by interpretation—necessarily begin in the material realm with the objects themselves but gain analytic hold and open upon interpretation only through vigorous attention,

beyond their state of being, to these objects' cultural significance; attention not just to *what* they might be said to signify but, as importantly, to *how* they might be said to signify; to their gerundial *meaning* (active verb form: to bring meaning into being), to the *way they mean*, both phenomenologically and metaphorically. This method of investigation may be usefully schematized in the form of an annotated course assignment.<sup>1</sup>

*Choose an object to consider.*

All objects signify; some signify more expressively than others. As the list of objects studied over the course of time in a single university seminar attests,<sup>2</sup> the possibilities are virtually limitless—especially considering that no two individuals will read a given object in the same way. So how to choose? In an unpublished essay written a decade ago, Prown offered the following reflection on this subject:

The reader may wonder, as I still do, how objects can be gauged for potential cultural expressiveness prior to subjecting them to analysis. Students in my seminar are asked to select the object on which they wish to work, the thought being that some sort of significant sympathetic vibration may occur signaling the potential for that particular individual to uncover some significant meaning in that particular object. I approve the selection, preferably after seeing the object, if I perceive or am persuaded of that potential. I have tried to define, with only partial success, just what it is that tells me—often quite clearly—that an object is culturally potent. It seems to depend on a linkage—formal, iconographic, functional—between the object and some fundamental human experience, whether engagement with the physical world, interaction with other individuals, sense of self (often expressed anthropomorphically), common human emotions, or significant life events.<sup>3</sup>

Prown goes on to suggest that “[t]he most persistent object metaphors expressive of belief” seem embedded in polarities, including but not limited to the following:

life/death (mortality)  
male/female  
privacy (seeing and being seen)/communication  
power/lack of control  
acceptance/rejection  
security/danger (fear)

truth (reality)/deception (illusion)  
natural/artificial  
stasis (permanence)/change (transience)  
pain/comfort  
desire/frustration  
protection/vulnerability  
freedom/constraint  
health/disability  
giving/receiving

These polarities, he says, in turn find material expression in a language of formal oppositions, again including but not limited to the following:

smooth/rough  
shiny/dull  
hot/cold  
soft/hard  
light/dark  
transparent/opaque  
up/down  
in/out  
stability/instability  
forward/backward  
vertical/horizontal  
straight/curved or crooked  
light/heavy  
thin/thick  
clean/dirty

In searching out an object to interpret, these are factors to be kept in mind. Moreover, such polarities and oppositions offer effective analytic “hooks” of use in organizing insights.

*Thoroughly describe this object, paying careful attention, as relevant, to all of its aspects—material, spatial, and temporal. Be attentive to details (for which a technical vocabulary will almost certainly prove useful), but ever keep an eye on the big picture. Imbue your description with the thick texture of taxonomy yet with the flow of narrative. Render it as easy and appealing to read, as effortlessly interdependent in its parts as the object itself. Producing a sketch or schematic drawing may further this process, but avoid wasting precious words at this point on introductions, conclusions, restatements of the assignment, or autobiographical confessions; just describe what you see. But be sure to enjoy the pleasures*

*in close looking—in translating material object into narrative description.*

Material culture begins with a world of objects but takes place in a world of words. While we work “with” material objects, i.e. refer “to” them, the medium in which we work as cultural historians is language. When we study an object, formalizing our observations in language, we generate a set of carefully selected nouns, adjectives, adverbs, prepositions, and verbs which effectively determine the bounds of possible interpretation. This is why the words we choose in saying what we see have such far reaching importance. It is out of our paraphrase of what we see that all interpretation grows. Speaking of *pictures*, for which we might substitute *objects*, Michael Baxandall has noted: “We do not explain pictures: we explain remarks about pictures—or rather, we explain pictures only in so far as we have considered them under some verbal description or specification . . . Every evolved explanation of a picture includes or implies an elaborate description of that picture.”<sup>4</sup> Description provides the bridge between the realm of the material and that of concepts and ideas.

The key to good description is a rich, nuanced vocabulary. Technically accurate language (nominative, for the most part) plays an important role in this, but ultimately not the most important role which is reserved, perhaps somewhat counter-intuitively, to descriptive modifiers (adjectives) and, most crucially, to terms expressive of the dynamics of interrelation (verbs, adverbs, prepositions). Only active verbs and descriptive prose cast in an active voice serve to establish cause and agency. As a means to this end, avoiding the verb *to be* (in all its forms: *is*, *are*, *there is*, *there are*) will help to make visible thematically-charged spatial and functional complexities otherwise flattened or obscured. Joseph Koerner, in arguing, here again in the case of visual images, that such description offers “the best access” to experiencing an object with immediacy, notes that evocative description can “register” the way an object “functions for one particular observer. Rather than saying *what* a visual image means, description tells us *how* an image has opened itself up to an interpretation.”<sup>5</sup> As with images, so too with objects which constitute, according to Prown, the broader category into which visual images fall.<sup>6</sup>

This means, in addition to active verbs, narrative structure and meaningful transitions. As opposed to a passive inventory one strives to craft a narrative account in an attempt to recreate an object’s visual and physical effect in words, what Robyn Asleson has termed a “fusion of visual analysis and verbal expression.”<sup>7</sup> The degree of detail one records remains a matter of personal discretion, but thoroughness counts. While too much

information can be almost as bad as too little, anything left out of description is lost to interpretation forever. The longer and harder one looks, the better one sees; the better one sees, the subtler the connections one finds oneself able to make. And, as a general rule, as many insights arise *out of the process of writing* as out of that of looking. These observations can be summarized as follows:

- we do not analyze objects; we analyze our descriptions of objects
- writing *constitutes* analysis: we do not really see with clarity what we have not said that we have seen

Composing and revising an objective-as-possible description frees one to move from a narrow focus on the object itself to a focus on the relationship between the object and oneself as its perceiver.<sup>8</sup>

*Elucidate your intellectual and sensory responses to your chosen object in the form of deductions, drawing insight and evidence from your own previous description.*

The more self-conscious one becomes, the more complex one's relationship to an object becomes, physically and ocularly as well as psychologically and experientially. For the purpose of analysis, there is value in isolating different realms of deductive response so that these can be handled more circumspectly.

One way we respond to what we see in or experience of an object amounts to intellectual detective work.<sup>9</sup> We see articulation and deduce patterns of use; we see interaction and deduce relationship; we see expression and deduce reception. Another way that we respond is through our senses: tactility suggests texture of engagement; temperature degree of intimacy; and so on.

Countless deductions of this kind suggest themselves. The process operates, in fact, so quickly that its effects are naturalized, come to seem true by definition rather than as evidence of meaningful inscription or construction. Only if we slow this process down do we find ourselves enabled to recognize and so to evaluate, indeed question, the myriad conclusions we risk otherwise to draw uncritically; only thus can we control for our own—however well-intended—careless or precipitous or culturally-biased leaps to arguably wrong conclusions. Careful deduction buys at least the opportunity to consider a fuller range of possibilities.

*Now elucidate your emotional responses in similar fashion, again drawing insight and evidence from your own previous description.*

Having addressed an object intellectually, and experienced it actually or empathetically with our senses, one turns, generally not without a certain pleasure and relief, to matters more subjective. How does the object make one feel? Specifically, what in or about the object brings those feelings out? As these will be, to a certain extent at least, personal responses, the challenge—beyond recognizing and articulating—is to account for them materially. The point is to begin to recognize the ways in which the object has created its effect. These more emotional deductions serve as a bridge to speculation about meaning.

*It is now possible to entertain hypotheses concerning what your chosen object signifies, what it suggests about the world in which it circulates or circulated—a world which, in some sense, metonymically, it represents. What cultural work might it once have accomplished or accomplish still? Out of what matrix of contested meanings—tensions, ambiguities, and contradiction—is its broadest meaning generated?*

Whereas the transition from description to deduction flows so easily we need to slow it down, subsequent moves from deduction to speculation, because they involve—even require—creativity, can pose a greater challenge. But interpretive hypotheses, or *questions* about meaning, will flow just as organically out of our process of deduction provided that we open our imagination to embrace, beyond its material facticity, an object's thematic resonance. Description and deduction, really processes of enablement, make it possible to defer and hence to control the interference of bias and assumption in recognizing what an object is. Speculation leads from the object as a closed system of signs into the world of intertextual relationships concerned not just with *what* but with *how* the object signifies. Speculation, moreover, reaches beyond unitary readings to lay stress instead on recognizing the object as a site of contested meanings.

Without pleasure taken in the work of the imagination, nothing of the sort is possible. Indeed, little defeats the purpose of this exercise so well as rigor without reverie. Meaning lies hidden in thematic figurations, in structural and functional metaphors, in polarities such as those schematized by Prown, cited above—hidden, but easily discernible, if only we go to the trouble of making them out.<sup>10</sup>

*Think creatively about what research would be necessary to test your interpretive hypotheses, detailing whatever speculations you find yourself entertaining, anticipating the argument you can imagine yourself eventually making, and prepare a plan of action (or research prospectus) accompanied by an annotated bibliography. Try to avoid foreclosing interpretive*

*possibilities by narrowing your focus too far. For now, simply explain the direction (or directions) in which you find yourself headed, the sort of research you anticipate undertaking, and the research problems the endeavor poses.*

A research prospectus should be detailed enough to give a clear sense of what *in your object* has given rise to interpretation. From what that you see or know or feel has your sense of your object's thematic content emerged? Be aware that different questions lead to different areas of the library (or to places other than the library, including collections of comparative objects) in which to do original research. Although your annotated bibliography need list no more than a handful of references at this point, these should represent the *range* of your inquiry. You may very reasonably be interested in learning what previous historians have made of your object or others like it, but your study will have now brought you to the point of *original interpretation*. Your proposed report on your findings should go beyond synopsis of others' ideas to offer a persuasive *argument* featuring the strongest claim you feel able to make regarding your object, supported by evidence discovered through research.

*Finally, compose a polished interpretive analysis.*

Interpretive analysis should not be mistaken for the sum of all the analytic exercises that precede it: description and deduction followed by speculation and then, in turn, by research findings. The method is a means to an end, not an end in itself. Analysis should digest, develop, and present perceptions generated from these exercises, but differ from them in being structured by an *argument*, a clearly-worded *claim* defended though detailed references to both the object (entailing passages of description and deduction) and its context (entailing some citation of sources, primary and secondary, as well as figures and notes). But while you should feel free to choose the extent to which description and deduction are present *as such* in your final essay at all, that these stages of analysis have been thoroughly performed ought to be discernible in both the kind and quality of internal evidence you marshal in substantiating claims regarding what and how your object signifies. The fruits of one's research are not to be presented as somehow self-explanatory, but rather as evidence introduced in support of claims. The object, in other words, must not be seen as a good illustration of something outside of itself—an historical milieu, for instance, or maker's intent—but rather such contextual phenomena be introduced into evidence as illuminating some aspect of the object's own intrinsic interest or meaning. It is the object, more specifically the object as *described*, that represents

the primary evidence, everything else being secondary to it. Through careful looking, one comes to see an object as significant—as *signifying*; one comes to possess, to a greater or a lesser degree, a privileged historical knowledge and understanding.

The entire process may be represented schematically in the following fashion:

### PROWNIAN ANALYSIS

Description—>

Deduction—>

Speculation—>

Research—>

Interpretive Analysis

Projects equivalent to or less than a semester's work might be organized around this program, loosely modeled on Prown's "Art and Artifacts" seminars at Yale, but modified as necessary for use by undergraduates, with the details of written assignments determined locally, as follows:

- choice of object, subject to approval
- first description
- meeting with instructor
- rewrite of description
- deductions
- speculations
- prospectus and annotated bibliography
- second meeting with instructor
- research and writing
- oral presentation
- submission of final paper

Despite its non-arbitrary rigidity,<sup>11</sup> this sequencing of the stages of interpretive analysis ought not to be resisted as a straightjacket but instead exploited as the logical result of a decades-long pedagogic experiment carried out in numerous academic settings where it has been subject to adjustment and modification. The method as thus configured works because it works. Neither its constitutive stages nor the sequence itself are ends in themselves, but rather means to the end of helping students "become aware of the historical evidence around them."<sup>12</sup> The method works because of the deceptively straightforward simplicity of freely choosing an object and describing it. It works because this process reliably yields awareness of complexity and polyvalent meaning. Students learn to

read history, and to dream history, embedded in—inscribed in—objects, richly and dynamically. As pedagogy this, perhaps, constitutes the method's fundamental achievement, described by Amy Werbel in the following terms:

The Prown method is the perfect analytic tool for what is now called "student centered" learning. Because the method places value on the interpreter's own input, it requires "active learning"—the system absolutely cannot work without it. Students engaged in this process also confront their own point-of-view as discrete, distinguishable, and constructed. This lesson is very hard for students to grasp using more abstract means. Prownian analysis . . . puts students into a direct relationship with historical materials.<sup>13</sup>

The twelve essays collected in the present volume, all products of Prownian analysis themselves, instantiate that process. They have been organized alphabetically (by author's last name) and not by medium, chronology, function, or theme to underscore their primary value as *essays*—models, or case studies. Each makes its own serious local contribution to scholarship, and will be read by specialists substantively. Indeed, their range—together they cover over 150 years of American history, interpreting a rich variety of objects and materials—renders these essays of unusual value for teachers of material culture surveys who wish to introduce their students both to the history of material culture per se and to a non-naïvely positivist interpretive methodology at one and the same time. But the principal focus of this collection is on applied methodology.

We begin with the premise that in objects there can be read essential evidence of unconscious as well as conscious attitudes and beliefs, some specific to those objects' original makers and users as individuals, others latent in the larger cultural milieus in which those objects circulated. Less concerned than some historians of material culture with the making or makers of such objects, our focus tends to be more on user interface, on the ways embedded meanings are actualized through use—matters subject always (and invitations always) to controlled speculation. Material culture, in this view of it, is consequently less an *explanatory* than an *exploratory* practice. Readers are invited to pay close attention to the role played in these essays by description, deduction, and by what creative speculation can become as tempered by, controlled by, and informed by close research: analytic interpretation, historicized. Most importantly, the reader is invited to enjoy the pleasures in close looking!

## NOTES

1. Thanks are owed to the many individuals who took the time to share their recollections and reflections, including three of the contributors to this volume—Robyn Asleson, Jennifer Roberts, and Amy Werbel—and seven others: Barbara Bloemink, Fintan Cullen, Leah Dilworth, Barbara Lacey, David Steinberg, Rebecca Stone-Miller, and Rebecca Zurier, comments by some of whom are cited directly below. I want to register a special appreciation to Paul Manoguerra and Harper Whinery at Michigan State for research and editorial assistance with this project. The class assignment which follows distills and reworks insights derived from Jules Prown's "Mind in Matter: An Introduction to Material Culture Theory and Method," *Winterthur Portfolio* 17 (1982): 1-19; an inspiration refracted through more than a decade of pedagogic experimentation by myself and many others.
2. See Preface, this volume, xiin. 4.
3. Jules Prown, Preface draft, c.1989.
4. Michael Baxandall, *Patterns of Intention: On the Historical Explanation of Pictures* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1985), 1.
5. Joseph Leo Koerner, *The Moment of Self-Portraiture in German Renaissance Art* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1993), 277.
6. See Prown, "Mind in Matter," passim.
7. Asleson notes in this regard that, in the mid-1980s when she took Prown's "Art and Artifacts" seminar, introduction to the method was furthered by coordinated work with writing tutors (personal communication, 22 July 1998).
8. The key control is to return ever and again to the object itself, through this process "amending and developing our ideas"; see Asleson, as above.
9. The order in which these deductive steps are to be deployed—intellectual and sensory followed by emotional deduction in the present formulation—has varied from practitioner to practitioner over the years. A certain ever-lucid flexibility, however, remains absolutely key.
10. Prown, in his Preface to this volume, notes: the goal of speculative analysis "is to discover the patterns of mind underlying fabrication of the artifact. These patterns are often, indeed are usually, metaphorical in character. Artifacts can be or can embody metaphors for aspects of the human condition—states of being, activities, relationships, needs, fears, hopes" (iii). Certain of these figurations take the form of psychosexual body references thematically recurrent in made objects.
11. Prown, Preface, this volume, p. xii.
12. Barbara E. Lacey, personal communication, 2 September 1998. Useful assignments, many in this spirit, can be found scattered throughout the 1997 *Material Culture Syllabus Exchange*, Winterthur Museum, 1997, a number of contributors to which were former Prown students.
13. Amy Werbel, personal communication, 4 August 1998.