

An introduction to material culture



About this free course

This OpenLearn course provides a sample of Level 1 study in Arts and Humanities:

<http://www.open.ac.uk/courses/find/arts-and-humanities>.

This version of the content may include video, images and interactive content that may not be optimised for your device.

You can experience this free course as it was originally designed on OpenLearn, the home of free learning from The Open University –

www.open.edu/openlearn/history-the-arts/culture/visual-art/introduction-material-culture/content-section-0

There you'll also be able to track your progress via your activity record, which you can use to demonstrate your learning.

Copyright © 2016 The Open University

Intellectual property

Unless otherwise stated, this resource is released under the terms of the Creative Commons Licence v4.0 http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/deed.en_GB. Within that The Open University interprets this licence in the following way:

www.open.edu/openlearn/about-openlearn/frequently-asked-questions-on-openlearn. Copyright and rights falling outside the terms of the Creative Commons Licence are retained or controlled by The Open University. Please read the full text before using any of the content.

We believe the primary barrier to accessing high-quality educational experiences is cost, which is why we aim to publish as much free content as possible under an open licence. If it proves difficult to release content under our preferred Creative Commons licence (e.g. because we can't afford or gain the clearances or find suitable alternatives), we will still release the materials for free under a personal end-user licence.

This is because the learning experience will always be the same high quality offering and that should always be seen as positive – even if at times the licensing is different to Creative Commons.

When using the content you must attribute us (The Open University) (the OU) and any identified author in accordance with the terms of the Creative Commons Licence.

The Acknowledgements section is used to list, amongst other things, third party (Proprietary), licensed content which is not subject to Creative Commons licensing. Proprietary content must be used (retained) intact and in context to the content at all times.

The Acknowledgements section is also used to bring to your attention any other Special Restrictions which may apply to the content. For example there may be times when the Creative Commons Non-Commercial Sharealike licence does not apply to any of the content even if owned by us (The Open University). In these instances, unless stated otherwise, the content may be used for personal and non-commercial use.

We have also identified as Proprietary other material included in the content which is not subject to Creative Commons Licence. These are OU logos, trading names and may extend to certain photographic and video images and sound recordings and any other material as may be brought to your attention.

Unauthorised use of any of the content may constitute a breach of the terms and conditions and/or intellectual property laws.

We reserve the right to alter, amend or bring to an end any terms and conditions provided here without notice.

All rights falling outside the terms of the Creative Commons licence are retained or controlled by The Open University.

Head of Intellectual Property, The Open University

Contents

Introduction	4
Learning Outcomes	5
Why study things?	6
A piece of broken masonry	7
The study of objects	8
How to study material culture	10
Object-centred approaches	10
Object-driven approaches	10
Describing objects	11
What is material culture?	12
Everyday objects	12
Making assumptions	13
Conclusion	16
References	16
Acknowledgements	16

Introduction

Why study things? Or put another way, what can we learn from objects that we can't find out from the reading of texts? There's no simple answer to these questions but, as we shall discover in the course of this course, there's no getting around the ubiquity of things. This OpenLearn course provides a sample of Level 1 study in [Arts and Humanities](#).

Learning Outcomes

After studying this course, you should be able to:

- understand what material culture is
- understand the origin of material culture as an area of study in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century
- understand the concepts of 'object biography' and the 'life cycles' of things.

Why study things?

Ever since the dawn of humankind, men and women have surrounded themselves with material objects, some of which have practical value (tools, utensils, clothing, etc.), and others for their aesthetic or decorative attributes (works of art). Today, many people, and whole societies, are said to have become obsessed with the purchase and collection of material things, so much so that some have even questioned the impact of such acquisitive habits upon the sustainability of the planet.

Activity 1

The films below were made by three different members of the course team and provide interesting insights into why we might study objects in the first place. People acquire and collect objects for many different reasons that can include cultural, economic and personal motivations.

Watch the films now. As you watch, make some brief notes on each, suggesting what you think may have motivated each individual to focus on their chosen object. How, if at all, do they differ from each other?

Video content is not available in this format.

[Encountering a pilgrim's medal](#)

Video content is not available in this format.

[Encountering a Greek vase](#)

Video content is not available in this format.

[Encountering a body](#)

Discussion

While all three are clearly passionate about their chosen objects, one of the three stood out for me as his choice was not made on the grounds of academic intrigue, but rather because of the highly personal nature of the choice. Piers Baker-Bates, in choosing the pilgrim's medal, was doing what we all do in life. He was investing a material object with symbolic and personal meaning, or, to put it another way, for Piers, the object represents a crucial aspect of his very identity.



Figure 1 Pilgrim medal from Santiago de Compostela, Spain. Photo: Mark Simmons.

Shortly, I shall ask you to think about an object in a similar way. But to get things started, and to show just how much importance we can invest in things, let me begin by showcasing an object which has personal meaning for me.

A piece of broken masonry

On the surface, my object has little real value, either practical or aesthetic, and, as if to underline the point, it currently occupies an unpromising location next to my downstairs toilet. And if that isn't bad enough, it has also suffered from the ravages of time; what was once a single piece of spray-painted concrete is now broken into three fragments, the largest measuring 4 x 4 inches.

This seemingly unpromising piece of broken masonry nonetheless signifies a great deal, on a global scale as well as personally. It is, in fact, a small fragment from the Berlin Wall, the destruction of which in 1989 probably marks one of the most important events of the late twentieth century. It is, then, a hugely significant artefact and one that I am proud to own.



Figure 2 Pieces of concrete taken from the Berlin Wall after its destruction in November 1989. Photo: Peter Elmer.

Objects such as this clearly have a meaning and value beyond their constituent parts (in this case spray-painted rubble otherwise fit only for the dump). As a historian and someone concerned for the rights of fellow citizens in Europe, these shards carry huge meaning and relevance, acting as a symbolic reminder of one of the most important

events in my own lifetime. Created from an act of mass destruction or popular iconoclasm, their existence today represents a victory for the oppressed individual and nation, as well as a constant reminder of other less fortunate people in the world who remain in thrall to tyrants. The eagle-eyed will also have noticed that I have chosen to 'exhibit' them, albeit in somewhat downbeat fashion. In doing so, there is a sense in which I am consciously echoing the role of the modern museum.

These fragments of the past also convey other meanings for me, their owner. The fragment was given to me and my partner as a wedding present in 1990, and thus reminds me of one of the most important and happiest events in my own personal life. As a gift, it also reminds me of the giver, a friend who we visited in Berlin before the Wall came down and who remains close to our family.

Finally, should I be inclined to do so, I could probably sell the fragments as they now possess a monetary value. One of the rich ironies of the physical destruction of the Berlin Wall and the consequent collapse of Soviet communism in eastern Europe lies in the fact that within days of these momentous events pieces of the Wall came onto the open market and began to sell around the world. Today, even small pieces of the Wall similar to my own sell on the internet for between £40 and £50. Elsewhere, companies advertise fragments of the wall as a unique accessory fit to adorn any corporate headquarters, both as an investment and as a reward to corporate go-getters who help to 'break down barriers' in the workplace.

Activity 2

Think of an object in your ownership which possesses both personal and wider significance for you. What is the object and why it is important to you?

Discussion

Possession of things – the ability to hold and touch them – clearly affords a degree of intimacy and significance that transcends both the written word and the vicarious pleasure of seeing objects in glass cases in museums. Our memories and very identity as human beings are closely wrapped up in the physical objects with which we surround ourselves. Some help create direct connections to our past and forbears; others, such as commemorative mugs, replica sports shirts and holiday souvenirs, say much about how we see ourselves and create identities. They thus form part of our consciousness, both individual and collective, and as such are clearly worthy of further study.

The study of objects

The study of objects constitutes a relatively new field of academic enquiry, commonly referred to as material culture studies. Students of material culture seek to understand societies, both past and present, through careful study and observation of the physical or material objects generated by those societies. The source material for study is exceptionally wide, including not just human-made artefacts but also natural objects and even preserved body parts (as you saw in the film 'Encountering a body').

Some specialists in the field of material culture have made bold claims for its pre-eminence. In certain disciplines, it reigns supreme. It plays a critical role in archaeology, for example, especially in circumstances where written evidence is either patchy or non-

existent. In such cases, objects are all scholars have to rely on in forming an understanding of ancient peoples. Even where written documents survive, the physical remains of literate cultures often help to provide new and interesting insights into how people once lived and thought, as in the case of medieval and post-medieval archaeology. In analysing the physical remains of societies, both past and present, historians, archaeologists, anthropologists and others have been careful to remind us that objects mean different things to different people. A Roman Catholic or Buddhist would view a relic of their faith in a very different light from either a Protestant or an atheist. What our ancestors once worshipped, we might discard or disdain. One great advantage of adopting such a relativist pose (where meaning is relative to the culture or individual that produced it) is that it ought to promote greater sensitivity to the multicultural nature of our modern world. We may not agree with those of other faiths and beliefs, but we can at least begin to understand why they think the way they do. Words, of course, can also accomplish these ends, but objects seem to play a special role in human societies in forging a sense of understanding, identity and belonging.

How to study material culture

Crucially, those with a special interest in the study of material culture tend to cross disciplinary or subject boundaries, and work in what we describe as an interdisciplinary fashion. At the same time, specialists from specific fields bring different approaches and insights to the study of material culture. We aim here to introduce you to some of the more accessible approaches to this exciting and new field of academic enquiry.

Object-centred approaches

One simple way of approaching our subject is to adapt the work of the American art historian Bernard Herman, a leading pioneer in the field of material culture studies. Herman has suggested that the study of things, broadly speaking, can be allocated to two distinct but overlapping approaches (Herman, 1992). In the first instance, he speaks of an 'object-centred' approach to the subject, one in which the focus of study is on the object itself. Here, we need to pay attention to the specific physical attributes of the object. The ability to describe the object – to engage, that is, with a list of descriptive criteria – is at the forefront of this approach. A typical checklist of the kinds of questions we might ask about an object include:

- how, and with what materials, was the object made?
- what is its shape, size, texture, weight and colour?
- how might one describe its design, style and/or decorative status?
- when was it made, and for what purpose?

By focusing on the object itself, we are thus being asked to concentrate on the materiality of things, or, in the words of historian Robert Friedel, to appreciate the simple fact that 'everything is made from something' and that 'there are reasons for using particular materials in a thing' (Friedel, 1993, pp. 41–50). Knowledge of this kind, for example, plays a crucial role for archaeologists and art historians in their attempt to place objects into broader categories or groups, or to identify the works of single artists or broader artistic or aesthetic movements.

Object-driven approaches

At the same time, Herman has identified a second strand to material culture studies, one which he describes as 'object-driven'. Here, the focus shifts toward an emphasis on understanding how objects relate to the peoples and cultures that make and use them. In particular, ideas about contextualisation and function become all important. As we have already noted, what objects mean may change through time and space. As products of a particular time and place, objects can tell us a great deal about the societies that gave birth to them. That is, they often help to reflect, or speak to us, of the values and beliefs of those who created them. At the same time, it is also important to remember that objects are not simply 'passive' in this way, but that they can also take on a more 'active' role, helping to create meaning rather than simply reflect it. In other words, they often emit a kind of power and authority which transcends their material status as simple objects made of wood or stone. It may not have escaped your notice that one of the first things that

people do in a revolutionary situation is to attack, deface and destroy material objects most closely associated with an overthrown regime or dictator. The destruction of the Berlin Wall is an obvious example. More recently, the iconic images of the assault on the statue of Saddam Hussein (in which, incidentally, the demonstrators used another object, a shoe, to demonstrate their hatred for the dictator) in 2003 provide telling evidence of the importance attached to objects in such situations. Sometimes, the violence to objects is perpetrated by those in power. In 2001, for example, the Taliban in Afghanistan made great capital from the destruction of one of the country's oldest and most treasured archaeological remains, the Bamiyan Buddhas. Here, religious and political motivations mixed to create an act of desecration that was widely vilified across the world. However, such acts of destruction or iconoclasm are not new. During the course of the Protestant Reformation in sixteenth-century Europe, many of the reformers went to great efforts to erase the material remains (crosses, statues, etc.) of what they saw as a false religious faith.

Describing objects

In very plain and simple terms, we might then say that object-centred approaches start with close description of the object and work outwards, while object-driven approaches start with the broader context in which objects are located and then work toward greater understanding of the object.

Activity 3

Now return to think again about the object you chose in the previous activity.

Using the object-centred and object-driven approaches, write a description of the object, giving brief details of its composition, size and contextual significance. With respect to the latter, you might wish to consider its broader importance within your family, your local community, or even as an 'historical' artefact.

Discussion

Thinking about objects in this way is helpful because it reminds us that our relationship to things is often highly contingent on a number of factors, some of which change over time. Sometimes the most unprepossessing of things take on a significance far beyond their economic value or practical use. Some objects we pass on to family members as heirlooms.

Like their owners, objects too have lives. This may seem an odd conceit as, clearly, inanimate or lifeless objects do not live and breathe as we do. But thinking about objects in this way can be highly illuminating. We might wish, for example, to think in terms of 'object biographies' or 'life cycles'. Like us, objects are conceived, designed and created. They then have a use, are consumed and appreciated, and finally dissolve, disintegrate and 'die' (or, in some cases, are afforded a form of afterlife in museums). Like us, throughout their existence they are subjected to wider forces in the world that help to shape their destinies. They even go on their travels, like us, and in the process acquire new identities and meanings.

What is material culture?

We all live our lives as part of a network of material things. Some of these things might strike us as remarkable, but many of the things which we use to shape our world and which in turn shape us as humans as part of our everyday lives go unnoticed.

Everyday objects

How did you start the day this morning? You might have started it, like I did, to the sound of a clock radio alarm, with the handle of a teacup in one hand and a bowl of cereal in the other. These objects – the clock radio, the teacup, the bowl – are unremarkable objects, in the sense in which I use them every day and have given them very little thought since I first purchased them. Yet they are integral to defining who I am (both physically and socially) as a human being, acting as a daily physical interface between myself and the world. While these objects may have been manufactured by acts of human agency, they also in turn shape me as a user and consumer of them. They mediate a wide range of interactions between myself and other objects and human beings, while themselves constituting a part of my physical world. For example, when I make a cup of tea and hand it to a family member in the morning, the teacup helps mediate a gesture of care and affection. Years of use of similar teacups mean that my hand has grown accustomed to the shape and feel of the cup, which I handle with adeptness and ease, without having to think of how to balance it between thumb and forefinger while I rush about the house. Furthermore, these objects are loaded with particular symbolic meanings within my own society which allow other people inside my culture to ‘read’ things about me from them. The radio station I listen to, the design of the cup and the brand of cereal in the bowl all mark me out and help define who I am socially, and all of these things contribute to the way in which I am represented to my colleagues, friends and family.

One important aim of this course is to help you learn to shift focus, so that you bring those objects which are normally part of the background into the foreground for critical scrutiny. This means beginning to see things simultaneously as solid (in the sense in which they are composed of matter which impacts on us and others as we interact with them) and mutable (in the sense in which we attribute particular meanings to them, and their meanings change depending on the contexts through which they travel); as both tangible and symbolic. Having learned to do this, you will then be able to start thinking of these things as source materials for your studies in the arts and humanities.

Activity 4

Think about what you did in the last hour before beginning to read this course, and make a list of all of the objects which you used in that time. What does your list say to you about your relationship to things? How important are these relationships to the ways in which we live our lives and conduct our daily activities?

Discussion

In answering this question, I drew up a table, listing actions in the first column and the objects which were involved in them in the second. Because I wrote this in the morning, I thought back over the process of waking up and getting out of bed, taking a shower, drying myself with a towel, brushing my teeth, getting ready for work and –

because I was working from home this morning – walking into my home office and turning on my computer to start writing. So my table looked like this:

Action	Objects
Wake up	Bed (and indeed the bedroom and the flat that contains it, which might also be considered to be objects in their own right, as might the floor across which I walked to turn the doorknob to open the bedroom door).
Shower	Boiler, shower cubicle, showerhead, taps, shampoo, soap, towel.
Breakfast	Pantry, refrigerator, kettle, teacup, teabag, milk, cereal box, cereal bowl, spoon, chair, table.
Brush teeth	Sink, tap, tube of toothpaste, toothbrush.
Start working	Chair, table, telephone line, computer, monitor, keyboard, mouse, books, pen, notebook.

My first reaction when looking back at this list was surprise at the sheer number of objects involved in the simple operations of starting my day. But the list of objects also very much defines me as an Anglophone living in the early twenty-first century in the city of London. In addition to the variations which exist within my own cultural context, parts of this list would potentially be very different for people living in different times and places. For example, if I was waking up in a village in Myanmar (Burma) my bed might look different, I might be using different utensils to prepare and eat my breakfast, and I might have chosen to eat rice instead of processed breakfast cereal. But by the same extension, many of these objects would be shared among people living across the contemporary world. Most people, for example, know and use soap, even in non-modern societies remote from urban centres. However, if I was waking up in London in the thirteenth century, for example, my list of objects would probably be even more different. Obviously I would not have had the computer, or running water, and I wouldn't have been drinking tea or eating processed breakfast cereal, as neither was known in England at that time.

One important point to note here is that no matter how distantly we cast our eyes across time and space, objects support our daily lives and many of these objects go unnoticed as we undertake everyday activities such as those described above.

Making assumptions

Activity 5

Take a look at the following list of ten objects and then spend some time jotting down your reflections on what the list suggests about the gender, age, beliefs, likes, dislikes or interests of a person who owns them. What might the list allow you to surmise about the owner's social and economic background?

- 42-inch flat TV
- Porsche 911 car

- golf clubs
- rosary beads
- laptop computer
- screwdriver
- bicycle
- tennis racket
- tennis ball
- hammer

You should allow 15 minutes for this activity.

Once you have completed this activity, you might want to make your own list of ten objects that you own and then find out what other people think of your list of things. You could then show your list to family or friends, asking whoever you share your list with to comment on what clues they can glean from the list to guess what sort of person owned them. Do you agree with other people's analyses?

Discussion

It is interesting to reflect on the assumptions we feel we can make about people based on the objects they own or use. Although there is nothing in the list above which specifies the owner's gender, it seems to me to indicate the sort of objects which a man might aspire to own – the large-screen television, the sports car, the sporting equipment. (Would such an assumption be sexist? How often do we make similar judgements about what men or women are likely to buy, own and use? The toys we buy for male and female children are one good example.) Similarly, we might surmise that the owner of the objects on this list is of reasonable means, in order to be able to afford such expensive consumer items. There are a number of pieces of sporting equipment on the list, which might suggest the owner likes to play outdoor sports. The rosary beads might indicate that the owner is a Roman Catholic. We don't really know anything about the hypothetical owner, but already we have begun to form a series of opinions about who they are, and what they like and dislike, based on the things they own. Objects are integral to the way we view others and the assumptions we make about them.

If you decide to take this activity further and share your own lists with others, you might find that some of the objects that people mention will (like those discussed in the previous activity) be very generic and shared by many members of your group, in which case it might be difficult to surmise anything about the identity of the owner(s). By contrast, other objects will strike you as interesting or noteworthy, in which case you might see them as indicating something about the identity of the owner. Such observations do not always turn out to be true – as I am sure this exercise will demonstrate – but nonetheless this indicates the power of objects to stand in for and symbolise particular groups of people and the ways in which they are represented (for instance in the media and in popular culture). Many people will show an implicit awareness of this through the selection of objects they choose to compile for the activity. Obviously, this won't be a randomly selected representative sample list of objects people own and use; rather, it will be a carefully considered collection which has been compiled with the aim of presenting oneself in a particular way to one's peers, a bit like a Facebook profile. Once again, an important aim of this course is to provide you with ways of thinking critically about the sort of assumptions we reach based on the objects people make, own, display and use, and how those assumptions are formed.

I hope these activities have helped you appreciate that different kinds of objects are used by people in different societies, and how it has become normal for us to think of similarities and differences between human groups across time and space through a study of the objects they use. How often have we heard the term ‘Stone Age’ used to describe people who live as hunter-gatherers? And how often do we think of ourselves as living in a ‘computer age’? But it is important to realise that people haven’t always been so closely defined by the objects they use – in other words, their material culture. This idea developed as part of the origins of the study of anthropology and archaeology in western Europe and America in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and is closely linked to the development of modern museums.

Conclusion

In conclusion, we can all agree, I think, that objects testify to the exciting possibilities inherent in the study of material culture. Increasingly, scholars are becoming more aware and attuned to the significance of things, whether human-made or natural, and their ability to 'speak' to us and address audiences. In addition to possessing life cycles and telling stories, objects speak to us a great deal about the people who make, use, own and display them.

We would like you to think about material objects as a new and exciting way of accessing knowledge about both the past and the present, and within a variety of academic disciplines.

References

Friedel, R. (1993) 'Some matters of substance' in Lubar, S. and Kingery, W.D. (eds) *History from Things: Essays on Material Culture*, Washington DC and London, Smithsonian Institution Press, pp. 41–50.

Herman, B.L. (1992) *The Stolen House*, Charlottesville, University Press of Virginia.

Acknowledgements

This course was written by Peter Elmer and Rodney Harrison.

Except for third party materials and otherwise stated (see [terms and conditions](#)), this content is made available under a

[Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 Licence](#).

The material acknowledged below is Proprietary and used under licence (not subject to Creative Commons Licence). Grateful acknowledgement is made to the following sources for permission to reproduce material in this course:

Course image: [Roderick Eime](#) in Flickr made available under [Creative Commons Attribution 2.0 Licence](#).

Figure 1: Mark Simmons.

Figure 2: Peter Elmer.

Don't miss out:

If reading this text has inspired you to learn more, you may be interested in joining the millions of people who discover our free learning resources and qualifications by visiting The Open University - www.open.edu/openlearn/free-courses