

INTRODUCTION

As long as humans have made material things, material things have shaped human history. They were the things people in the past sat on, wore, ate from, hunted with, treasured, wrote upon, wrote with, traded, exchanged and longed after. Material things influence our needs and define our aspirations; they express our ideas, encode value and convey messages (Figure 0.1). For historians, finding ways to access the values and meanings embodied within material things brings the past into clearer focus.

For many of us, it is the things of the past – whether encountered in the attic, in the museum or in the landscape – which first inspired our interest in history. This interest might be prompted by an aesthetic appreciation of an object, an emotional engagement with its owner or simply a memory of that moment of discovery and the curiosity it prompted – what is it, why is it here and what does it mean? This is one form of engagement most of us can relate to when we consider the charm of a treasured artefact. As Sherry Turkle has put it, ‘We think with the objects we love; we love the objects we think with.’¹ But then there are also the ordinary things, the overlooked, the everyday – they fill our worlds, make our routine actions possible (or obstruct them). We cannot – as Lorraine Daston has emphasised – even ‘imagine a world without things’.² Material culture frames all of our actions and experiences and is constitutive of them. Material culture sheds light on our production and consumption of goods, our power relations, social bonds and networks, gender interactions, identities, cultural affiliations and beliefs. Material culture communicates all kinds of human values, from the economic or political to the social and cultural. And whilst historical objects cannot offer a direct and clear window on past worlds they are a powerful form of evidence, and a ‘provocation to thought’³ they are as complex, deceptive, partial and multi-layered as textual survivals.

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0.1 A Rowntree's 'Dairy Box' tin (purchased 1953). This product containing assorted chocolates was launched by Rowntree's, a British chocolate business, in 1937. Confectionary was rationed during the Second World War, a regulation which remained in place until 1953. This box belonged to a former colonial officer, purchased en route to West Africa for his first posting shortly before the end of rationing on confectionary. He retained the box as a memento of his journey, in particular the memory of the ship's shop allowing him to buy as much as he wished as rationing did not apply there. This was shown to Sarah Longair in 2016 as part of a British Academy / Leverhulme Trust Small Research Grant project entitled 'Objects of Colonial Memory'. Author's photo.

Since the mid-1970s, disciplines across the arts, humanities and social sciences have experienced a real surge in interest in material culture, which is sometimes referred to as 'the material turn'.⁴ This proliferation of work on the material world has inspired many historians, working across a wide range of subjects and periods of time. As a consequence, there is now substantial scholarship on the value of material objects for historical research, which often appears in the form of edited collec-

tions. Seizing the moment when historical material culture studies is now well established, this student-orientated research guide illuminates how we as historians can engage with material sources in practice. In the preceding paragraph we outlined how exciting and important material culture can be. In the chapters that follow, we will show how you can turn instinctive curiosity into rigorous historical research. What follows is, therefore, a practical introduction for students and researchers who wish to use objects and material culture as primary sources for the study of the past. Throughout this guide, you will find case studies that offer tangible examples of current historical work – their questions, methods and analyses – but it is intended to be read alongside published research on material culture. In the references and suggested reading (located at the end of each chapter) you will find avenues for further enquiry. Here, we use examples drawn from the early modern period through to the twenty-first century, from a wide range of geographical locations, and aim to challenge researchers to try new ways of working as well as providing the guidance necessary to do so. Histories of the last five centuries have been driven to a remarkable extent by textual records and it is with this in mind that *History through Material Culture* offers researchers a step-by-step guide to approaching the material evidence that survives from around 1500 to the present day.

Whilst many readers may be registered on an undergraduate or a postgraduate course at a university, this guide is written for anyone with an interest in history and material culture. We hope that the structure of the guide, taking you from planning through to writing up a research project, will be as useful to individuals working outside of academia as to those working within universities and colleges. Material culture research might just as easily be prompted by a visit to a museum, a new job or a conversation with a relative as it is by a formal course of study or assignment.

Anticipating that many researchers will feel under-skilled or lacking in confidence in tackling artefacts of the past, we will trace the process of research from the conception and development of the research questions through to the writing-up of findings – giving particular attention to the ways in which objects can be located, accessed and understood. This practical guidance is augmented by the use of examples of seminal and contemporary scholarship in this interdisciplinary field, so that readers can see how particular approaches to sources have been used to develop historical narratives and arguments. From the start of their historical studies, students can and should use objects and images not

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simply as illustrations but as key primary sources. However, the study of objects does require specific, yet acquirable and transferable, analytical skills which will enrich an interrogation of the past and provide avenues for original thought. To this end, *History through Material Culture* will de-mystify both the process of researching objects and the way research practice relates to published scholarship and, in doing so, enable researchers new to material culture to pursue their research questions to the full.

Of course, when we work with material culture – like any historical source – we are dealing with a partial historical record and must negotiate both the presence and absence of evidence and the reasons for them. Moreover, the vast majority of material things from the past have not survived to the present day. There are two main factors that determine survival: material composition and societal values. An object's materiality and how it has been treated have an important role in determining its physical survival. For example, stone and ceramic objects endure well in many environments, as do metals if they are not exposed to water. For this reason, ceramics and coins are some of the objects most commonly excavated by archaeologists and can provide vital clues to the date of a site. Meanwhile, textiles survive poorly in the ground and are prone to material disintegration more generally – whether from attacks by insects or through decomposition, to which all organic matter is at risk. Aside from material resilience, there are many social factors that have an influence on the survival of some objects over others. In the most basic sense, this relates to the way objects are valued by the society in which they were made and by subsequent societies. Everyday objects of low monetary value may be highly prevalent in a society of origin but be rare survivals over centuries because of their perceived insignificance. Meanwhile, objects that are highly expensive or rare at the time of their making might retain their value to society over time, ensuring their survival. These different perceptions of value (economic, cultural or social) have played an important role in collecting practices and, for objects, residing within a collection has a protective effect – making them more likely to remain intact. So, again, the factors that made some objects more likely to be collected and kept than others have had a hugely important influence on what we have access to today.

Objects matter / object matters

This is an exciting time to be incorporating material culture more explicitly within historical research. There has been a wealth of academic publications since the beginning of the twenty-first century which demonstrate the exciting potential of taking a material approach to historical themes and topics. We shall draw upon these throughout this book. Museums are increasingly opening up access to their collections offering abundant primary source material. The pioneering History of the World in 100 Objects project, a collaboration between the British Museum and the BBC, demonstrated how a single object could offer a view into a historical period. In these fifteen-minute radio programmes, the close examination of an individual object initiated an exploration of the many contexts in which the object could be understood, from its makers to the history of its arrival in the museum's collection. As a radio programme with downloadable podcasts, the project responded to contemporary methods by which the public engage with historical content. During each programme a range of commentators from different cultural backgrounds discussed the themes prompted by the object – far more than could be included in an object label in a museum setting. The series prompted listeners to examine the images online or visit the museum and listen to programmes in front of the objects themselves. The programmes inspired numerous projects and publications on the model of 'A History of X in X Objects'. Naturally, there are criticisms of the approach: in some cases the objects gained a greater prominence and iconic status through the programme than they actually enjoyed at the time of their making; in others the links from object to context were sometimes deemed to be tenuous. Nonetheless, A History of the World in 100 Objects has undoubtedly been hugely influential in moving an object-driven approach from the academic sphere firmly into the public realm.

THE ACADEMIC LANDSCAPE

There have always been good reasons for researchers to engage with material culture, and changes in universities since the mid-1990s have encouraged interest in this kind of work. In the United Kingdom and elsewhere, researchers have been asked to think more deeply about the impact of their research in wider society. Responses to these changes have varied, and academics have robustly defended the need for research

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that answers fundamental questions rather than meeting specific societal challenges. However, many researchers have been prompted to think about the opportunities that do exist to make their research meaningful beyond the university's walls. For historians in particular, museums and heritage organisations have proved especially important collaborators in the production and communication of research. Museums and heritage organisations have a dual role as the custodians of valuable architectural, object and archival collections and also as public institutions with a mission that includes engaging their diverse audiences of visitors. In periods of economic recession, museums and heritage sites have often found their budgets stagnate or reduce, placing pressure on activities that are considered non-essential. In these conditions, collaborations between researchers and heritage sites can prove particularly beneficial, combining complementary skills and knowledge to achieve shared aims. Put simply, where academics might be rich in the time and skills needed for primary research but poor in terms of their abilities to deliver societal impact, museums tend to maintain their broad public audiences but struggle to resource new research on their collections. A plethora of recent partnership projects have shown that, with a little bit of care and consideration of different working cultures, collaboration across these sectors is not only achievable but also rewarding.⁵

In this research guide we will be discussing a range of academic disciplines that have purchase on the study of material culture in all its different forms. These same disciplines, to a large extent, predict the ways in which object collections have been organised in institutions today. These disciplines include archaeology, social anthropology, art history, human geography, design and the decorative arts, literary studies and, of course, history itself. In Chapter 1 the different approaches to thinking about material culture that have emerged from these fields of study will be explored in detail. Throughout this guide, we will retain a focus on what researching material culture means for historians and how we can use these sources to answer key questions of historical enquiry. However, we will also recognise the ways in which using material culture can help the discipline of history to change, develop and ask new questions about the past.

For disciplines like history, a focus on material culture is inevitably compared with the more traditional source material – text. Historians have always relied on the written word to understand society in the past and are relatively unused to considering artefacts that do not contain words. Moreover, historians have traditionally viewed history as a polit-

ical process and focused their energies on the study of the elites who held the reins of power in society. Taken together, this over-reliance on the textual record and emphasis on the elite, institutional, legal and political were mutually reinforcing, as the most powerful actors in society were the most likely to leave a formal record of their lives, lives that enacted political power over others. However, whilst the powerful were able to leave a record in words, we must also acknowledge that many (often most) people in the past were illiterate and where low-status individuals did leave texts behind, they rarely survive. Non-elite lives did not always revolve around text – and objects could be seen as a way of reaching the histories of the ordinary, the everyday, the non-elite and the non-literary. It would certainly seem sensible to use the wealth of material sources that survive from times past, as well as their textual equivalents. And most historians who use material culture as a source choose to combine it with other textual sources.

For researchers seeking new territory, museums and historic sites have much to offer. Even well-known collections in large, national museums such as the British Museum or the Science Museum in Manchester have not been heavily used by historians. Moreover, the large and the famous represent only a small proportion of the collections open to the public and available to researchers. Across the world there are small, independent museums, hidden, institutional collections, local town or county museums, specialist collections in historic houses, little-known house museums in urban areas and remote collections in rural locations. With a little bit of work and some general protocols in mind, it is possible to gain access to many of these collections and the historical worlds they can help open up. In Chapter 4, we will discuss in detail the different ways in which you can locate and access collections for research purposes depending on the kind of institution in which they are held.

TERMS AND DEFINITIONS

In the various literatures relating to the study of objects, there are many definitions of the term ‘material culture’ as it has become a defining and cross-disciplinary concept for research on the material world. As Susan Pearce comments, terms such as ‘object’, ‘thing’, ‘specimen’, ‘artefact’ or ‘good’ describe individual pieces or groups of things, whereas ‘the term “material culture” [is] used as a collective noun’. She stresses that ‘All of these terms share common ground in that they all refer to selected

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lumps of the physical world to which cultural value has been ascribed.⁶ In the 1970s, the anthropologist James Deetz qualified: 'Material culture ... is not culture but its product. Culture is socially transmitted rules for behavior, ways of thinking about and doing things ... Material culture is ... that sector of our physical environment that we modify through culturally determined behavior.'⁷ A decade later, the specialist in American studies Thomas Schlereth asked the question 'Who first fabricated the slightly awkward expression: "material culture"?' Schlereth traces its use back to the elaborately named anthropologist and collector Augustus Henry Lane-Fox Pitt-Rivers who, writing in 1875, encouraged his readers to 'consider material culture as the "outward signs and symbols of particular ideas of the mind."⁸ For Schlereth's purposes, then, material culture is usefully defined as 'that segment of humankind's biosocial environment which has been purposely shaped by people according to culturally dictated plans.'⁹ This emphasis on contact with people and a relationship with human culture is common in literature on material culture studies. In fact, the term 'artefact' denotes the hand of humankind in the making of an object in contrast to things that are produced by nature alone. In museums, this distinction between the man-made and the natural is articulated by the terms 'artefact' and 'specimen'. As Linda Hurcombe has described:

An artefact is defined as anything made or modified by people, so artefacts are not just 'things' but are intricately linked with people's needs, capabilities, and aspirations. All societies and the individuals within them use objects to define, punctuate, and manipulate their social personae.¹⁰

Amiria Henare comments, more simply: 'Artefacts may be broadly understood as material objects that are or have been in touch with people.'¹¹ Of course, this definition leaves open the possibility of natural specimens which have been appropriated by people for cultural reasons to be understood as 'artefacts'. Susan Pearce takes this view, arguing:

I would contend that specimens from the natural world work within human society in exactly the same ways as human artefactual material, whatever they may do in nature and under only the eye of God. They are a part of the human construction of the world both as single pieces and (but rather more obviously) as collections.¹²

The term 'material culture' works well as it emphasises the idea that materiality is part of culture and proposes that the social world cannot, therefore, be fully understood without attending to its material realities. However, to date, historians working on material culture have tended to emphasise the 'culture' over the 'material'.¹³ In Chapter 3 we will explore in detail examples of recent historical scholarship on material culture in order to illuminate the different ways in which researchers use material evidence or evidence of material culture to make historical arguments.

In this guide we will focus our discussion on three-dimensional, man-made objects which pertain to the study of a people or culture. However, as there are no clear boundaries for the historian between a ceramic vessel and a manuscript miscellany as potentially useful primary sources, we will also refer to objects such as paintings (as art works) and photograph albums (as archival, visual culture). Art works, in particular, occupy an important place within historical material culture studies. Aside from the status of paintings or prints as valuable historical sources, they are also present us with visual images of a huge variety of objects from the past. It is often by looking at a painting that we will first encounter an object of interest, whether that artefact is foregrounded in the piece (as in the case of still lifes) or whether it augments the main subject of the painting.

If you are working with 'art works', one aspect of your enquiry relates to what makes them valued. Once again, context is critical. An object is only determined as a work of 'art' by the value and prestige attached to the skill of the creator and, therefore, the aesthetic value of the thing.¹⁴ Art works are often characterised by a sense of their being one-off creations – unique, rare and costly to purchase. However, visual culture also indicates how societies choose to represent themselves in the present and in relation to the past. For example, in the Renaissance, the revival of interest in Antiquity and the classical era revolutionised philosophy, literature, art and architecture. Using visual material as supporting evidence can also be very helpful in answering questions concerning the value of material culture. For example, Dutch genre interiors of the seventeenth century depict in detail objects in domestic settings, which is very useful for learning more about their use, meaning and value. However, as with portraits or paintings of political events, these images must be critically assessed to disentangle issues of artist, genre, symbolism and representation.

Objects may also combine elements of the textual and the visual or

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have been created, at least in part, with concern for artistic presentation. Take, for example, a photograph album – combining as it does the photographs themselves; the annotated text that might accompany them; identifying places, individuals or dates; and also the material construction of the album itself as a bound book. An object of this kind demands analytical skills that can attend to its composite nature and the different challenges of decoding the individual images versus the album as a whole. Where an album might encompass a variety of media, other objects might prompt us to consider where their boundaries lie. For example, if we think of buildings as a category of material culture then should we look at the building alone – its bricks and mortar, its architectural design – or do we also need to consider the environment it occupies? What parameters should we draw for ourselves? This depends to a large extent on the questions we wish to answer, but there is a strong argument that the study of material culture – in its acknowledgement of the importance of materiality – requires us to attend also to the spaces occupied by material things. However, where rooms, buildings and landscapes all have material qualities to analyse, we might also think about the ‘intangible heritage’: living culture that resides in communities, practices and traditions (such as dance and music) and ways of remembering collective pasts.¹⁵ This last category of heritage is outside of the scope of this guide, but can become pertinent to studies of material culture as they relate to a diverse range of cultural practices.

Research project: a common structure

1. Project summary (What is this about? What are the research questions and why are they interesting and important?)
2. Background (What has been written about this before and by whom?)
3. Methodology (What, if any, theoretical frameworks are you using? What approach will you take? What methods will you use?)
4. Sources (What will you use and why? Where are they located?)
5. Outcomes (What will be produced at the end of this research project?)

READING THIS GUIDE

This research guide is organised in such a way as to lead you through the different steps involved in preparing and carrying out a research project which uses material culture. The guide acknowledges that historical research takes many forms and that many studies may only use

objects as one small part of their evidence base. Nevertheless, whilst acknowledging the diversity present in historical material culture studies today, we focus here on what needs to be done to develop a project that is strongly focused on material culture and which is likely to involve the direct study of artefacts in museum or heritage collections. With this in mind, the guide begins with a broad discussion of the approaches that can be taken to thinking about material culture and moves on to the practical steps required in planning research, formulating research questions, developing a methodology, locating and analysing sources, and, finally, writing up your findings. If you have a clear sense already of the direction you wish to take, this guide will act as a prompt to proceed methodically and to get the most out of your research. If, on the other hand, you are just beginning to think about studying objects, you will find within these pages a summary of the field in which you hope to work and a range of possible routes forward. This guide will work best if it is taken up at the beginning of planning a research project and referred to regularly – in this way, it will act as a research companion, raising questions and offering possible solutions at each stage. Writing a research proposal is often the first step in devising a project (see box) and being able to describe the aim of the project, position it within the existing literature and explain what evidence you will be analysing and why will be invaluable as you progress.

Chapter 1 will provide an introduction to the origins of historical material culture studies in terms of both academic research and museum practice. In particular, approaches developed in anthropology, archaeology and art history will be explored. The origins of the study of objects will also be traced through the history of collecting and collections, showing that objects take on alternative meanings as they move from the culture of their origin to the cabinets of museums. The theoretical underpinning of material culture studies will be elucidated and the discussion will demonstrate that by viewing the objects of the past as inanimate and inactive as compared with the living, breathing humans who made, exchanged and used them, researchers can miss the dynamism of the object–person interactions that took place many decades or centuries ago. Finally, the chapter will discuss the circumstances that brought about historical material culture studies. In particular, the realisation amongst historians of the 1960s and 1970s that for writing histories of indigenous peoples, slave communities or the poor and illiterate, textual records did not hold the answers. It concludes with a summary of the key trends in historical material culture research today.

In Chapter 2, we explore the strategies for incorporating material culture as a primary source and show how material culture research can be employed to make historical arguments. This chapter makes clear that there is significant variety in the ways in which scholars and practitioners look at material culture and that these differences are primarily driven by the fact that art historians, literary scholars, curators and cultural geographers ask different questions of material things. This chapter also shows how object-specific questions create important and vital studies in and of themselves, but also how they can contribute to overarching research questions with wider historical significance.

Chapter 3 shows that, very roughly, we can divide historical approaches to the study of material culture into two: the study of the object as the primary subject and the use of material culture to promote new perspectives on historical questions. The chapter uses a series of case studies of historical work that deploys material culture in different ways, focusing on the selection of primary sources, modes of analysis and the role of material culture in the project as a whole. Finally, this chapter discusses examples of scholarship that deal with the material but which lack relevant and accessible artefacts to research. This is a common difficulty for historians for whom collections do not adequately support their chosen subject. Dealing with the absence of things will become important for many historians working in this field, and this section will provide some practical tips for negotiating this challenge to the research process.

In Chapter 4, we focus on how you can find out where different kinds of material culture might be located in museums, galleries, historic sites or private collections. The chapter attends to the practical concerns of how to use object catalogues, communicate with curators and negotiate different kinds of institutions. Whilst the emphasis is placed on locating and accessing material culture that you can work with directly, digital resources in terms of online catalogues and image resources are also covered, as these can provide both a first step in discovering relevant material and also a helpful point of reference as your project develops.

Chapter 5 looks at the methods you can employ to analyse individual objects or collections as part of the research process. These include observation and careful recording of objects in text, sketch and diagram form and also forms of analysis that are reliant on equipment such as photography and microscopy.

Chapter 6 considers the different formats in which you might wish to present your work, from exhibition labels and blogposts to an essay

or dissertation. This chapter addresses features of writing-up that are particular to the use of material culture.

A short afterword summarises the key points found within this research guide, and a bibliography and resources section at the end of the book provides opportunities for further reading and investigation. We hope that this guide will equip the student or researcher with the necessary tools to undertake material culture research in history and forge new ground in this exciting and expanding field.

NOTES

- 1 S. Turkle (ed.), *Evocative Objects: Things we think with* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2007), p. 5.
- 2 L. Daston (ed.), *Things that Talk: Object lessons from art and science* (New York: Zone Books, 2008), p. 7.
- 3 Ibid.
- 4 H. Green, 'Cultural History and the Material(s) Turn', *Cultural History*, 1:1 (2012), 61–82.
- 5 See, for example, the Share Academy Project; the Thames Valley Country House Partnership project; the National Alliance for Museums, Health and Wellbeing; and the Yorkshire Country House Partnership.
- 6 S. M. Pearce (ed.), *Interpreting Objects and Collections* (New York: Routledge, 1994), p. 9.
- 7 J. Deetz, *In Small Things Forgotten: The archaeology of early American life* (New York: Anchor Press, 1977), p. 35.
- 8 T. J. Schlereth, 'Material Culture Research and Historical Explanation', *The Public Historian*, 7:4 (1985), 21–36, p. 21.
- 9 Ibid., 22.
- 10 L. M. Hurcombe, *Archaeological Artefacts as Material Culture* (London: Routledge, 2008), p. 3.
- 11 A. J. M. Henare, *Museums, Anthropology and Imperial Exchange* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), p. 3.
- 12 Pearce, *Interpreting Objects*, p. 1.
- 13 F. Trentmann, 'Materiality in the Future of History: Things, practices and politics', *Journal of British Studies*, 48:2 (2009), 283–307.
- 14 This point was provocatively made by Marcel Duchamp with his exhibiting of a standard urinal in a gallery – transforming an everyday, mass-produced article into a work of art.
- 15 For more, see L. Smith and N. Akagawa (eds), *Intangible Heritage* (London: Routledge, 2009).

RECOMMENDED FURTHER READING

- Auslander, Leora, 'Beyond Words', *American Historical Review*, 110:4 (2005), 1015–45.
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- MacGregor, Neil, *A History of the World in 100 Objects* (London: Allen Lane, 2010).
- Turkle, Sherry, *Evocative Objects: Things we think with* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2007).
- Woodward, Ian, *Understanding Material Culture* (London: Sage, 2007).