

DIMENSIONS OF MATERIAL CULTURE

An Interdisciplinary, Team-Taught Course
University of Wisconsin-Madison
Fall Semester 2004

It's a material, a material, a material, a material world.

--Madonna

The whole factual world of human affairs depends for its reality and its continued existence, first, upon the presence of others who have seen and heard and will remember, and, second, on the transformation of the intangible into the tangibility of things.

--Hannah Arendt

Course Description: This course introduces the new and highly interdisciplinary field of material culture studies. It is intended for advanced undergraduate and graduate students who are interested in any professional endeavor that requires training in material culture, including careers in museums, galleries, historical societies, historic preservation organizations, and academic institutions. During the semester, students will have varied opportunities to contemplate "things"--the material world to which people give meaning and which, in turn, influences their lives. The course takes the perspective that what we make, see, inhabit, eat, acquire, cherish, and discard--all are important agents of communication and part of broad social and cultural contexts.

During the semester, faculty from varied departments within the university, as well as guests from other institutions, will lecture and discuss with students material-culture dimensions of their own research. Other course work will include field trips and, for each student, an independent research project.

*Development of this course was made possible
by a Chancellor's Collaborative Teaching Award.*

Supervising Faculty

Prof. Virginia Boyd
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Office Hours: Tues. & Thurs.,
12-1:30; also by appointment

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Office Hours: Thursdays, 1:15-2:30
also by appointment

COURSE REQUIREMENTS & EVALUATION:

Class Participation (30%):

Students are expected to attend class regularly and to participate actively in discussions. Class absences are discouraged and must be explained to one of the professors in advance.

Assigned Readings: All assigned readings are available in PDF format via each student's UW portal (<http://my.wisc.edu/portal>, then go to the following links: Academic/Library/Reserve).

Students are expected to come to class fully prepared to discuss the readings on the days they are assigned.

Written Work:

1. ***Doing-Seeing-Writing Notebook (35%):*** Each student will keep a loose-leaf binder, in which to accumulate typewritten copies of responses to assigned readings and designated lectures. Through these writings, you will enhance your ability to analyze, succinctly summarize, and recall scholarly materials, as well as create a readily accessible compilation of course work.

Synopsis of each assigned reading. On the day that each reading, or set of readings, is assigned (see the Class Schedule), bring to class a typewritten synopsis of each item. In no more than 200 words for each reading, state the author(s)' major argument (interpretation) and evaluate it. What does the reading tell you about material culture? Does it relate to other assignments and/or the lectures, and, if so, in what way(s)?

Synopsis of Designated Lectures: Members of the class will receive a list of relevant lectures (and related exhibits) scheduled on campus during the current semester. In lieu of the regularly scheduled class time, we will attend at least one such event, for which each student will write a synopsis of what s/he observed and learned; keep in mind the questions asked in the preceding paragraph.

2. ***Material Culture Case Studies (35%):*** In consultation with either Professor Boyd or Professor Lee, each student will develop an independent research project related to her/his area of academic specialization or interest.

No later than Sept. 30 Consult with Professor Boyd or Lee about possible topics for your Case Study. For this you will need to schedule an appointment.

Oct. 28 Annotated bibliography, or resource list, due. This should be an exploration of all sources you have identified and examined which promise to be useful your research project. For printed items, give the complete bibliographic citation for each. For objects or collections of objects, cite the location for each. If you conduct an interview, name the person, location, and date of the interview. In addition, state why each source appears useful for your topic.

- Nov. 30-
Dec. 14 Graduate students will offer a 20-minute class presentation about their research projects (schedule to be arranged).
- Dec. 7 Undergraduates will present their findings in a typewritten paper due (2,000-3,000 words).
- Dec. 14 Paper due from graduate students (4,000-5,000 words).

Grading policies:

Each project is due on the date it is assigned. Turning work in late will carry a reduction in the assigned grade, so it is best to plan on timely completion. Any student having special needs should make that known to the professors in the first two weeks of classes.

A Word about Plagiarism: Copying another's words or ideas without indicating the source is plagiarism, a serious offense. A first offense will result in a grade of F on the assignment. A second offense will result in a grade of F for the course grade.

Religious Holidays:

According to University policy, any student who expects to be absent from class work because of religious holidays must, within the first two weeks of class, notify the instructor(s) of the specific date(s) on which s/he will be absent. Students bear the responsibility for arranging make-up assignments. If necessary, reasonable limits on the total number of days claimed by any one student will be set.

CLASS SCHEDULE—MODULE 1:

THINKING ABOUT MATERIAL CULTURE

- Sept. 2 Introduction to the Course
Virginia Boyd and Jean B. Lee
- Sept. 7 Topic: What Can We Learn from Objects?
Readings:
[1] Robert Kunzig, "La Marmotta," *Discover* 23 (Nov. 2002): 33-41.
[2] John N. Wilford, "String, and Knot, Theory of Inca Writing," *New York Times*, Aug. 12, 2003.
[3] William B. Hesseltine, "The Challenge of the Artifact," in Thomas Schlereth, *Material Culture Studies in America* (1982), pp. 93-100.
- Sept. 9 Topic: What is Material Culture?
Bring to class: a favorite mug or cup
Readings:
[1] Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, "Why We Need Things," in *History from*

Things: Essays on Material Culture (1993), pp. 20-29.

[2] Jules D. Prown, "The Truth of Material Culture: History or Fiction?" in *ibid.*, pp. 1-19.

Sept. 14 **Topic:** Where Does Material Culture Fit as an Academic Field?

Readings:

[1] Daniel Miller, ed., *Material Cultures: Why Some Things Matter*, chap. 1.

[2] "Material Culture or Material Life? Discipline or Field? Theory or Method?," in Schlereth, *Cultural History and Material Culture*, pp. 17-33.

[3] Steven M. Beckow, "Culture, History, and Artifact," in Schlereth, *Cultural History and Material Culture*, pp. 114-23.

CLASS SCHEDULE—MODULE 2:

MAKING THINGS SPEAK: PRIVATE AND DOMESTIC DOMAINS

Sept. 16 **Topic:** Ceramics in America

Ann Smart Martin (Dept. of Art History)

Readings:

[1] Ann Smart Martin, "Magical, Mythical, Practical, and Sublime: The Meanings and Uses of Ceramics in America," in Robert Hunter, ed., *Ceramics in America*, 1 (2001): 29-46.

[2] Martin, "The Role of Pewter as a Missing Artifact: Consumer Attitudes Toward Tablewares in Late Eighteenth-Century Virginia," *Historical Archaeology* 23 (Fall 1989): 1-27.

[3] Martin, *Makers and Users: American Decorative Arts, 1620-1860, from the Chipstone Collection* (1999)—available online at www.chipstone.org

Sept. 21 **Field Trip:** Exhibit of "Raymond Dugan's Bayeux Tapestry,"

Place: Design Gallery, Human Ecology Building—**meet at the gallery at the regularly scheduled class time**

Reading: Jane Schneider and Annette Weiner, eds., *Cloth and Human Experience* (1989), pp. 2-26.

Sept. 23 **Topic:** Analyzing Objects, Part 1

Readings:

[1] E. McClung Fleming, "Artifact Study: A Proposed Model," *Winterthur Portfolio* 9 (1974): 153-72.

[2] Laurel Ulrich, *The Age of Homespun: Objects and Stories in the Creation of an American Myth* (2001), chap.

Sept. 28 **Topic:** Analyzing Objects, Part 2

Readings:

[1] Jules D. Prown and Kenneth Haltman, eds., *American Artifacts: Essays in Material Culture* (2000), pp. 1-27.

[2] Susan M. Pearce, "Thinking about Things," in Pearce, ed., *Interpreting Objects and Collections* (1994), pp. 123- .

- [3] Graduate students only: R. Elliot et al., "Towards a Material Culture Methodology," in Pearce, ed., *Interpreting Objects and Collections*, pp. 109-22.

Sept. 30 Topic: The Archaeology of Ancient Households
Nicholas Cahill (Dept. of Art History)

Readings:

- [1] Nicholas Cahill, "Olynthus and Greek Town Planning," *Classical World* 94 (2000): 497-516.
[2] L. C. Nevett, "Gender Relations in the Classical Household," *Annual of the British School at Athens* 90 (1995)L 363-81.
[3] Also scan *Cahill, *Household and City Organization at Olynthus* (2002), especially chap. 4--available online at www.stoa.org

Oct. 5 Topic: What's in a Picture?

Richard L. Pifer (Director of Reference and Public Service
Wisconsin Historical Society)

Readings (on 3-hour reserve at the Wisconsin Historical Society):

- [1] Alan Trachtenberg, "Introduction: Photographs as Symbolic History," *The American Image: Photographs from the National Archives, 1860-1960* (1979).
[2] Marjorie L. McLellan, *Six Generations Here* (1997), pp. 1-11, 53-81; also read the captions for images throughout the book.
[3] George Talbot, *At Home: Domestic Life in the Post-Centennial Era, 1876-1920* (1976). Look at the images and read the captions.