AMERICAN MATERIAL CULTURE

Professor Miller        Spring 2014
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Herter 640

“A method based on the document is prejudiced; fated to neglect the majority of people, for they were non-literate, and, within the bounds of literacy, to neglect the majority of people, for they did not write.

Henry Glassie
Folk Housing in Middle Virginia

Our Shared Purpose

The aim of this course is to introduce students to study of “history from things,” or material culture. Throughout the semester, we will attend both to the methods by which material culture can be harnessed for historical analysis and to significant genres or avenues of inquiry undertaken by scholars working with material culture sources. Students will gain familiarity with the most significant literature in material culture studies, major trends in material culture historiography and methodology, and the leading figures who have given the field its shape and direction. Because my interests tend to center on the US before the Civil War, and because that is the strength of area museum collections, the course will focus on that period, though students are invited and encouraged to range more widely in their written assignments.

Assignments: Readings, Writings, Discussions

Readings:

- Ken Ames, Death in the Dining Room and other Tales of Victorian Culture (Phila: Temple University Press, 1992)

Other books we will consult:

Robert Blair St. George, ed., Material Life in America, has been placed on RESERVE
William Hosley, The Great River, has been placed on RESERVE
Styles & Vickery, Gender, Taste & Material Culture has been placed on RESERVE.

Writings: There will be three short writing assignments and one major piece of writing.

Assignment #1, due February 18: in five pages, compare the methodological choices across the assigned readings, and assess the relationship of those choices to the author's subject matter and argument.
Assignment #2, due February 24: in five pages, review Robert Blair St. George’s *Conversing by Signs*. This paper caps Part I of the course, which aims to consider the several landmark statements and illustrations of methodology; this being so, your review should engage with specificity the other authors read before this date. To what degree does St. George rely on, and depart from, scholarship that has come before?

Assignment #3, due March 31, caps our work at Historic Northampton. We will be spending four weeks in those collections, talking about regional style more generally and gaining familiarity with three genres of material culture: baskets, furniture and clothing. During this month, you will work with classmates to create an online microexhibit using objects we encounter during those visits.

Assignment #4, due the last day of class, is a significant historiographical essay (shoot for around 20 pages) on the “Material Culture of ____________.” Your topic could be “The Material Culture of Faith,” “The Material Culture of Civil Rights,” “The Material Culture of Class,” “The Material Culture of Medicine,” “The Material Culture of Childhood,” “The Material Culture of Sports” —any topic will do so long as it is broad and encompassing. The aim of this paper is to discover and assess the ways in which material culture analysis has, and/or could, contribute to a study of wider scholarly interest. Try to choose a topic that allows you to engage at least a dozen or so titles.

**Resources**

Over the course of the semester you may want to check out the below:

- Digital Library for the Decorative Arts and Material Culture, [http://decorativearts.library.wisc.edu/resources.html](http://decorativearts.library.wisc.edu/resources.html)
- Center for Material Culture Studies (U-Del) [http://www.materialculture.udel.edu/resources.html](http://www.materialculture.udel.edu/resources.html)

**SCHEDULE OF READINGS AND DISCUSSIONS:**

**Monday, Jan 27: Introduction:**

**Readings:**

- Harvey Green, “Cultural History’s Material ‘Turn,’” *Cultural History* 1.1 (2012), 61-82 UDRIVE
- Sophie White, “Geographies of Slave Consumption,” *Winterthur Portfolio*, Vol. 45, No. 2/3 (Summer/Autumn 2011), pp. 229-248, JSTOR
PART ONE: METHODS, MANIFESTOES

Monday, Feb 3: First Things First

Reading:
Ken Ames, “Words to Live by,” Death in the Dining Room, 97-149 RESERVE

Assignment: Browse the Winterthur Portfolio and the Journal of Design History.
Come to class ready to share 2 specific examples that suggest to you the most effective methods currently in play.


Reading: Bushman, Refinement of America RESERVE

TUESDAY, Feb 18: Approaches to/from the Architectural Record

Reading: Glassie, Folk Housing in Middle Virginia (SELECTIONS), RESERVE
Michael Ann Williams, Homeplace (SELECTIONS). UDRIVE
Dell Upton, “Black and White Landscapes in Early Virginia” in St. George, Material Life in America RESERVE

PAPER DUE: Assignment #1

Monday, Feb 24: And now for something totally different…

Reading: Robert Blair St. George, Conversing by Signs RESERVE

PAPER DUE: Assignment #2
PART TWO: LAB

Monday, March 3: The Material World of New England
MEET AT HISTORIC NORTHAMPTON


This will be our first of several visits to Historic Northampton. Today we will get acquainted with the collections in general and see how they confirm/contradict the major analyses by Bushman and St. George.

Please familiarize yourself with the site via http://www.historic-northampton.org/

Monday, March 10: The Material World of New England: Basketry
MEET AT HISTORIC NORTHAMPTON


March 17 – SPRING BREAK

Monday, March 24: The Material World of New England: Furniture
MEET AT HISTORIC NORTHAMPTON


Jaffee, *A New Nation of Goods* Preface, Chapters 2 & 5; RESERVE
[and Review Zimmerman, “Workmanship as Evidence”]

EDUCATE YOUR EYE: In advance of this class, spend some time browsing online so you can begin to get a sense of the evolution of chair styles, from Williams & Mary through the Victorian age.

Monday, March 31: The Material World of New England: Dress
MEET AT HISTORIC NORTHAMPTON


EDUCATE YOUR EYE: In advance of this class, spend some time browsing online so you can begin to get a sense of the evolution of style, especially b/w 1790-1930. Another good bet is Joan Severa, *Dressed for the Photographer*. 
PART THREE: PUTTING IT ALL TOGETHER

Monday, April 7: Material Culture and the study of Women’s History

**Reading:** Sarah H. Hill: *Weaving New Worlds: Southeastern Cherokee Women and their Basketry*
Ellen Hartigan-O’Connor, “Collaborative Consumption and the Politics of Choice in Early American Port Cities,” in *Gender, Taste, and Material Culture in Britain and North America, 1700-1830* UDRIVE

[Review Adams, Williams, Miller, Ulrich and other readings that engaged women’s history]

Monday, April 14: **NO CLASS: USE THIS TIME TO WORK ON YOUR FINAL PAPER, AND ALSO PAPER DUE: Assignment #3**

WEDNESDAY, April 23: New Directions Forward

**Reading:** Jennifer L. Anderson, *Mahogany: The Costs of Luxury in Early America* (Cambridge: Harvard, 2012). Professor Anderson will be visiting class, so make time to give this a good close read and formulate good questions for her, about her work, new directions in the field, etc.

Monday, April 28: **FINAL PAPERS DUE: Class will be reports-out on your individual papers.**