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Object Study as Interdisciplinary Exploration for the Twenty-First Century
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I consider an object-based lesson to be successful when my students are empowered to make their own observations and to develop the confidence to move from perceptions to conceptions, from what they perceive to the development of broader questions, problems or theories about the subject of their examination. Typically, my primary pedagogical goal is not to convey (or discover) set information about a specific object or historical context. Instead, it is to model or teach a way of reasoning, from object to idea, from the specific to the abstract. In these ways the study of material things is necessarily an interdisciplinary endeavor, with the skills developed broadly applicable beyond the narrow world of art history or even academia.

For historians of American art (and material culture), the work of Jules Prown, particularly his methodological innovations as outlined in his 1982 essay, "Mind in Matter: An Introduction to Material Culture Theory and Method," offers a key intellectual foundation for this approach. His framework provides a pathway for scholars to move from individual sensory perceptions of an object to a way of connecting material evidence to a range of sources and contexts to deduce and speculate about the ideas an object may reflect about the people who created it. In his groundbreaking writing and teaching, Prown pushed his students beyond employing material things as illustrations of accepted concepts and to use them as evidence. Today, the continued power in this approach does not simply rest in that intellectual end but also in the realization that the thinking, the connections, and the questions that the process demands are as meaningful to students as any insightful conclusions developed through its application.

My views about the potential for the close study of material things to break down disciplinary barriers and to teach critical thinking skills come through my research into the history of Object Lessons, which is the topic of my forthcoming book, through the multi-part, collaborative Tangible Things project (with Laurel Ulrich, Ivan Gaskell, Sara Schechner and Samantha Van Gerbig), which has been a series of courses, an exhibition, a popular [EdX MOOC](#), a [book](#), and a wide range of object-based projects at the [Chipstone Foundation](#) over the past few years. The specific pedagogical contexts on which I am reflecting here are diverse: the lecture hall at Harvard, the online classroom, and the students we teach in various [Object Labs](#) at Chipstone. Again and again, material things demand an interdisciplinary approach. The process of close looking inspires critical thinking, the ability to make and defend non-obvious connections.

Object Lessons are an historical classroom practice based on the notion that students can learn to think through a regimented engagement with material things.

Beginning in the nineteenth century, students were instructed to study material things through a five-step process and to move from description and an understanding of the qualities and parts of an object, to its associative qualities, to ways it may be classified or arranged, and finally to synthesis and composition. In many ways, this early object-based pedagogy mirrors the Prownian method (though he joked that he “wasn’t that old” when I first talked with him about the possible parallels). Unlike the Prownian method, however, Object Lessons were primarily intended to impact the students engaging in the practice instead of mainly developing new ideas about the materials studied (though that was also possible). In 2014, Chipstone based its principal Object Lab, created for nine undergraduates from across the United States, around this theme. We presented students with the historic classroom methodology and three objects from the collections, a [cabinet](#), a [chair](#), and [table](#) and asked them to create videos applying the method to the selected objects. With faculty mentors, the students worked through the five steps of the Object Lesson to develop a series of conclusions about the objects—some playful others serious. Yet, the most important part of the experience was in the way it allowed students to approach unfamiliar objects as documents of the past. The videos served as models for this process for both Harvard students and online students enrolled in the HarvardX course. Just as in the Prownian method, these experiences present object study as both scalable and broadly applicable to other cultural sources.

In addition to empowering students to start with their own observations of material things, in “Mind in Matter”, Prown argues for the application of the tools of many disciplines to enhance the study of art objects. The interdisciplinary potential of object study similarly is at the center of the Tangible Things project. To model the potential of an interdisciplinary approach, Chipstone invited four Harvard graduate students to Milwaukee for a special Object Lab to train them to serve as teaching fellows in the Tangible Things course. The result was the video, [“This is not a chair.”](#) It includes six different ways to understand chairs—through lenses borrowed from natural science, economics, art history, anthropology, history, and the history of science and medicine. Paired with assignments applying this mode to other material things, this became the starting point for assignments that challenged students—both at Harvard and online—to apply these interdisciplinary approaches to other objects.

At the end of “Mind in Matter,” Prown reminds us that certain material things may offer an “affective link” between past and present. He suggests that the identification of this link and the related “concretions of the realities of belief” held by people in the past represent the true promise of material culture. However, for many of us who teach with objects, there is more to the promise of the Prownian method and the many forms of object study it inspired than the insight it offers us into the past: these approaches have the radical potential to transform our students into more dynamic and nimble thinkers.