



ISSN: 2471-6839

PANORAMA

Journal of the Association of Historians of American Art

Response: Pedagogy Round Table

Margaretta M. Lovell

Jay D. McEvoy, Jr. Professor of American Art
University of California, Berkeley

The American Studies program at Yale permitted candidates preparing for qualifying exams to design an interdisciplinary course as one of four examination fields, and I embraced the opportunity. I had taken an MA at Winterthur (unbeknownst to me, following in the footsteps of Jules Prown), and worked in the American Arts office at the Yale University Art Gallery for three years to support my growing family while starting the PhD program as a part-time student. Immersed in the world of objects—I explored not only the extraordinary works in the American tradition, but also Yale’s anthropology, natural history, and rare book collections—I read the work of Fernand Braudel and thought hard about the relationship of objects to the interpretation of the past and the present. I noticed that few academics in any discipline sought to read objects to answer significant questions—how did patriarchy work? How did attitudes toward time shift and how did these assumptions affect daily life? It seemed to me that these vast collections were an untapped laboratory for humanities research and thinking; they could help answer questions like these. To most of my peers in literary studies, history, philosophy, and even anthropology, objects seemed beside the point. Insofar as they were legible, they believed that objects could not be coaxed into providing evidence about important issues. I wanted to explore exactly that presumption, and devised a course entitled *Art and Artifacts: The Interpretation of Objects* that focused on theories of interpretation and methods of analysis that put objects in the frame of serious humanities research. My interest was not just in ideas per se, but also in the nitty-gritty of materials and fabrication techniques, and the global markets that resulted in culturally-specific (and often culturally-hybrid) objects—art objects, but also machines, vernacular structures, food, clothing, and tools.

My examiners liked the idea of the course and I was asked to teach it the following year, and was appointed to the faculty in art history. A substantial budget enabled me to bring in object-theorists of all kinds—Yi-Fu Tuan, Henry Glassie, Cary Carson, and others. It was a large auditorium-filling course for undergraduates but it also attracted a substantial enrollment of graduate students. Because I had not finished (or indeed started) my dissertation, I could not grade the graduate students, so Charles Montgomery, professor of American art and my former boss at the Yale University Art Gallery, was brought on board to co-teach the course with me. Unfortunately, halfway through the semester, quite suddenly, Montgomery died, and Jules Prown was asked to shepherd the *Art and Artifacts* graduate students’ research projects. He decided that he really liked the idea of the course and that summer set us both to reading even more

widely and revising the syllabus. We co-taught the course each year until I left for California three years later. His 1982 essay “Mind in Matter: An Introduction to Material Culture Theory and Method,” grew out of this evolving experiment in pedagogy.

After we had taught Art and Artifacts (later Material Culture) together for two years—during which I was also learning-by-teaching the history of American painting, revising the venerable American Decorative Arts course, and co-teaching the penultimate seminars in the interdisciplinary History, Arts and Letters program—I finished my dissertation. When I heard that Jules Prown would be a reader, I quickly went back and inserted puns wherever possible as I had learned in the course of our teaching together that he liked puns as much as he disliked split infinitives, and I wanted to enliven his experience of my heavily-literary text.

There were two reasons our teaching meshed well—we were both skeptical of the customary art historical privileging of a quest for sources, influences, and artistic genius, and we both wanted to find ways to slow down and deepen the process of intellectual engagement with objects. Jules devised his now well-known three-step approach to objects—especially art objects—to give students a systematic way of approaching and inhabiting artworks, one that validated, even invited, a presentist approach. Attending to the object in itself, bleached of context and the interference of assumptions at the outset of inquiry, was a process familiar to me. As an English language and literature major late in the era of New Criticism, I had been taught to read a poem as an intricate and complete thing, independent of the entanglements of biography and historic context. My own preference in forestalling students’ tendency to leap toward an answer, a solution, a decoding with source hunting, has been to start them with an interrogative exercise: I ask them to compose a sequence of twenty thoughtful questions prompted by close analysis of the object, its parts, and the associations it prompts. I also ask them to draw. My two years at the Ruskin School of Art in the Ashmolean Museum at Oxford where I was given the same art education as the nineteenth-century artists I would later study—perfected drawings of plaster casts of antique sculpture followed by life class, still life, and landscape—taught me the value of *really* looking at an object or a posed figure in order to understand and render it with accuracy, curiosity, and insight.

After the questions, for me, come the secondary sources for clues to interesting misunderstandings, and then, with significant historical issues in view, the archives. The Annales School and New Historicism reintroduced the richness of context and its potential for improving our understanding eras and objects. Here, an amplitude of primary documents of all kinds—letters, newspapers, popular visual culture, census reports—begin to speak to those other primary sources, those seemingly obdurate and mute object sets, and become evidence in larger arguments concerning significant questions in social and cultural history.

I have continued to teach Material Culture as a graduate seminar, most recently co-teaching it with my sinologist colleague Patricia Berger. While most art historians venture into social, cultural, economic, religious, or political history to better understand the object under scrutiny, I was (and continue to be) eager to reverse this process, that is, to look at objects—and necessarily *sets* of objects—to better understand the culture

in which they were created. Moreover, I have become increasingly interested in object biographies, the downstream life of objects, the new narratives they acquire as subsequent generations keep and radically re-understand them. They become windows not only on the generation of their makers, their patrons, and the resources (intellectual and material) involved in their creation, but also on those subsequent cultures, eras, and peoples that have revalued and reimagined them into entirely disparate narratives.

But having said that, I am afraid I cannot say that I have developed a teachable system. Exactly how one's probing curiosity hits on the question that cannot be well asked or answered without object evidence, I cannot say. One can only set up the conditions that may be rewarded by looking carefully, thinking interrogatively, reading widely, and plunging courageously ahead. Of the lessons from those early years teaching with Jules, the two with greatest impact on me and my teaching have been: first, slow down, and second, embrace co-teaching whenever offered.