

HIS 9834B History of Things: An Intro to Material Culture



Winter 2012 – UWO History Department
Monday 2:30 – 4:30 p.m.

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Office Hours: Wednesdays 12 noon - 2 p.m.

Course Description:

The history of “things” – such as hats, cars, buildings, ipods, furniture, jewelry, medical instruments, food, Tupperware, art, and more – is an introductory course to the interdisciplinary field of material culture. Material culture studies the objects that people make, use and throw away and how these objects are a part of – and indeed shape – human experience. How did people make things, and what did they use them for? Can objects provide insight into identities and relationships within a given society and/or culture? In this course, we shall examine objects towards integrating material culture into our study of the past and historical interpretations. We shall explore the extent to which the study of material things complement, sometimes challenge, the documentary record as well as inspire different historical questions when we begin our research with objects.

This course introduces students to a variety of theoretical and methodological approaches in material culture through weekly seminar discussions. Issues of material form, function, embodiment, consumption, object agency, and more will be discussed through seminar readings towards illuminating the complex and powerful roles that “things” of all sorts play in our lives. How have historians and other scholars incorporated objects into their work? In addition to studying the scholarship, students will apply using objects as a major category of evidence through workshops and assignments. In our workshops and other “hands-on” activities offered, various aspects of museology and artifact collection management will be addressed, such as the collecting, exhibiting and interpreting of objects for public audiences.

Object-centered disciplines such as archaeology, anthropology, art history and folklore tend to be more comfortable with “things” than historians. It is hoped that this course will encourage history students to be less reluctant to incorporate objects in their study of history and to provide them with innovative ways to approach it.

** There are numerous websites geared for public audiences on history and material culture. Check out –

- The British Museum, “A History of the World in 100 Objects” at http://www.britishmuseum.org/explore/a_history_of_the_world.aspx
- Material Culture and Objects by Daniel Waugh at <http://chnm.gmu.edu/worldhistorysources/unpacking/objectsmain.html>

Course Objectives and Outcomes:

- To introduce students to various theoretical and methodological approaches used by historians, anthropologists, archeologists and others in the interdisciplinary field of material culture;
- To consider, on the one hand, how objects can inform historical inquiry as well as, on the other hand, how historical research can shape what we know about the material worlds of the past;
- To discuss various material culture approaches as “tools” for the historian who seeks to integrate objects into the study of the past;
- To practice analyzing and understanding objects and their contexts;
- To introduce students to various aspects of museology and artifact collection management, such as the collecting and exhibiting of objects;
- To reflect on the use and interpretation of objects in scholarly works as well as museum exhibitions, public history, and other contexts.

Course Readings:

- Karen Harvey, ed. *History and Material Culture: A Student's Guide to Approaching Alternative Sources* (Routledge, 2009)
- Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, *The Age of Homespun: Objects and Stories in the Creation of the American Myth* (New York: Vintage Books, 2002) – paperback edition
- Articles -- list of course readings to be circulated

Course Work and Evaluation:

- **Seminar & Workshop Participation**..... 35 %
 - * Workshop #1: Working with Objects – The UWO Medical Artifact Collection Due: Feb 15 (blog)
Due: Feb 20 (comments)
 - * Workshop #2: Museum London – A Curator’s Job Due: Mar 14 (blog)
Due: Mar 19 (comments)
- **Book Critique** (3-5 pp) 15 % Due: Feb 6
- **Material Culture Research Essay or Exhibit Proposal** (18-25 pp)
 - * Presentation (15 minutes) & Participation 10 % Due: Apr 2 and Apr 9
 - * Research Essay or Exhibit Proposal (18-25 pages) 40 % Due: Apr 23

Description of Course Work:

- **Seminar Meetings** (attendance, discussion, engagement, summations)

We shall meet weekly as a seminar group to discuss assigned readings towards gaining insight into some of the key issues, methodologies, and literature in material culture. A schedule of our meetings is presented below. A reading list will be circulated in class.

Attendance is mandatory. Students are expected to come prepared to discuss the assigned readings in detail, and to bring their notes to meetings. Your engagement in the discussion is mandatory to earn marks. Hint: doing the readings and simply highlighting passages is not enough – you must demonstrate to the group that you understand the readings, can extract the salient points or arguments of each reading, and verbally articulate these points by contributing qualitatively to the discussion. So make notes.

At the end of each meeting, one student will be asked to identify **the key take-home point or points** from the meeting's discussion. What did we learn from the readings and our discussion that day? At the end of class, a student may volunteer to do this or the professor may simply call on a student to provide the meeting summation. So again, make notes to help you follow and remember the discussion during the seminar meeting.

- **Book Critique** (3-4 pp double-spaced)

- Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, *The Age of Homespun: Objects and Stories in the Creation of an American Myth* (New York: Vintage Books, 2002)

The purpose of this assignment is for you to critique a book written by an historian who employs material culture theory and methodology. **In a short essay (3-5 pp), discuss Ulrich's approach towards material culture and its use in historical research, with a detailed discussion of Ulrich's analysis of one artifact** (ie. the Indian basket or Hannah Barnard's cupboard or the chimney piece or the bed rug, etc.) How well does the author utilize "things" or objects to present her story? To what extent does Ulrich's approach differ (or not) from the methods and models discussed in our previous seminar meetings?

- **"Hands-on" Activities: Workshops and Case Displays**

In this course I have scheduled two workshops towards offering you some "hands-on" experience of working with objects. Individual workshop handouts will be distributed closer to the date of each workshop outlining the format, required background reading, and blog assignment.

Blogs are not meant to be lengthy but are meant to be insightful and descriptive of the in-class workshop experience. I would like students to upload their individual blogs **PLUS** comment on the blogs of your peers (minimum 3 other blogs besides your own). Also, feel free to respond to any comments on your blog too. Note the due dates for both these activities.

There will also be the opportunity, in small groups, to mount a case display in Lawson Hall during the term using the UWO Medical Artifact Collection. This small group activity is not mandatory, but for those of you interested in mounting displays, I hope that you embrace this as another great "hands-on" opportunity!

- **Workshop #1: Working with Objects – The UWO Medical Artifact Collection**
- **Workshop #2: Museum London -- A Curator's Job**
- **Lawson Hall Departmental Display Case (voluntary small-group activity)**

- **Material Culture Research Paper or Exhibit Proposal** (18-25 pp double-spaced)

Students must produce a piece of written work that is either “object-centred” or “object-driven” and engages with some aspect of material culture theory and methodology. This work may take the form of a traditional research paper or an exhibit proposal. Examples of past research papers and exhibit proposals are uploaded to WebCT.

Research Paper: Like all history research papers, the material culture research paper should contain an introduction that includes a clear thesis, followed by a well-organized argument based on good research and informed by material culture theory and methodology, and a strong conclusion. Remember the essay must be “**object-centred**” or “**object-driven.**”

The oral presentation of your research paper (on Apr 2 or Apr 9) will take the form of a 15 minute research talk, followed by a 5 minute Question and Answer session, as part of a mock “History and Material Culture” academic conference. Make sure that your talk clearly presents your research thesis (argument) and your source base. Presenters may consider using PowerPoint but it is not a requirement.

Exhibit Proposal: The exhibit proposal should also be a well-written document that is “object-centred” or “object-driven,” and based on solid research. You are proposing an exhibit for Museum London’s Interior Gallery (2nd floor) which is approximately 20 feet by 40 feet in size. (See photos of past exhibits in this space uploaded on WebCT or check out www.museumlondon.ca)

The structure of an exhibit proposal should be organized differently than a traditional research paper. For this assignment, your proposals should include the following aspects:

- (1) **Title Page** “Title of your Exhibit”: An Exhibit Proposal; Your name; Submitted to Professor McKellar, HIS 9834; Date.
- (2) **Table of Contents** 1 page
- (3) **Exhibit Description (“Pitching the Exhibit”)** - Why this topic/story/object(s) would make a good exhibit? Something to Say? (demonstrate your research, theory and argument) – what’s the hook and take-home message (so what?) – be clear and repeat it in the conclusion) - **Purpose and Overview of the Exhibit** (do this well or committee will read no further) - demonstrate your research with use of footnotes, etc.
- (4) **Exhibit Storyboard (“Mounting the Exhibit”)** – What Specific Objects and Text Would be Included? (demonstrates your judicious selection of objects and text for public audiences) - present specific text panel information; list artifacts and/or images (which will also serve as caption labels)
- (5) **Bibliography** – museum collections, historical research sources (both primary and secondary), material culture studies (what informed your approach?)

The oral presentation of your exhibit proposal (on Apr 2 or Apr 9) will take the form of a 15 minute “pitch” to the Exhibits Committee of Museum London. There will be a 5 minute Question and Answer session that follows. Make sure your “pitch” clearly gets across your exhibit concept and message, the centrality of the objects, and your research competence on this theme. Presenters may consider using PowerPoint but it is not a requirement.

Submitting your Essay or Proposal ---

Penalty for late essays is 2% each day (including Saturdays and Sundays) after the due date. Essays are to be handed to the professor on the due date or, if unable to do this, to the History Office located at SSC 4328 to be date stamped. Faxed and emailed essays are not acceptable. Essays slipped under professor's office door are also not acceptable. Extensions may be granted if legitimate circumstances are presented by the student to the professor well in advance of the due date. Poor work planning (such as "I have XX other papers due") is not grounds for an extension. **Please note that after 7 days (one week past the due date), the assignment will not be accepted without a properly documented excuse.** There will be no exceptions.

Students are reminded that academic accommodation on medical grounds can in most instances only be granted if supported by a University of Western Ontario Student Medical Certificate. See the policy on Accommodation for Medical Illness at:

http://www.uwo.ca/univsec/handbook/appeals/accommodation_medical.pdf

Students are reminded that they should read and comply with the university's position on academic ethics and academic dishonesty. Plagiarism and submission of work that is not one's own or for which previous credit has been obtained are examples of academic dishonesty.

HIS 9834B - Seminar Meeting Topics & Schedule

Winter Term 2012

Jan 9	Introduction: What is Material Culture?
Jan 16	History and Material Culture: How Can Things be Used in History?
Jan 23	Studying Things: Some Methods and Models
Jan 30	Culture and Consumption
Feb 6	Objects as Evidence, as Metaphors? * Book critique due
Feb 13	Workshop #1: Working with Objects – The UWO Medical Artifact Collection * Blog due Feb 15; Comments due Feb 20
Feb 20	<i>No class meeting – Reading Week</i>
Feb 27	“Small Things” – The Objects of Everyday Life
Mar 5	Museums and Material Culture
Mar 12	Workshop #2: Museum London – A Curator’s Job * Blog due Mar 14; Comments due Mar 19
Mar 19	Object Biographies
Mar 26	Objects, Identity and the Urge to Collect
Apr 2	Presentations: Group A
Apr 9	Presentations: Group B
Apr 23	* Final Research Paper/ Exhibit Proposal due