

Beyond Text: Objects as Historical Sources

Annotated Bibliography

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Introduction

After decades of engagement, the field of historical material culture studies has become part of the mainstream of historical research. Taught in most history departments and programmes, it is no longer news that historians can learn from objects as much as they can from texts. The influence of a generation of scholarship is also felt in the themes and questions that we tend to consider as a discipline. These developments have also been underpinned by the increase in funding for research that embeds collaboration between curators, archivists and librarians (the custodians of our collections) and academic institutions. Increasingly, schemes ensure that the impetus for research comes from the collections rather than the universities, and this is a welcome development. More recent preoccupations with bodies, feelings, environments and more-than-human histories all seem to owe a debt to the ‘material turn’ that took place at the turn of this century. As such, it is difficult to choose just eight readings for this bibliography, but the selection below is an attempt to speak to the core concerns of the field as it is now, whilst also attending to its origins and earlier practices.

Guidance on using material culture in research

Leonie Hannan and Sarah Longair, *History Through Material Culture* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2017).

This 2017 Institute of Historical Research guide was written explicitly to introduce students to using material culture in the study of history. It guides the reader through the historiography and how to design a research project, from the more practical elements of how to access material sources through to effective ways to analyse them. Its intention is to demystify and make accessible objects as primary sources, highlighting the opportunities that objects offer in enriching our understanding of the past. A useful work to use alongside it is Karen Harvey (ed.), *History and Material Culture: A Student's Guide to Approaching Alternative Sources*, 2nd edn (London: Routledge, 2017), as it includes chapters from several historians explaining their own approaches to the material world. Susan Pearce (ed.), *Interpreting Objects and Collections* (London: Routledge, 1994) is another useful introductory guide with a series of essays from scholars of different disciplines explaining their use of objects.

Jules D. Prown, 'Mind in Matter: An Introduction to Material Culture Theory and Method', *Winterthur Portfolio*, 17:1 (1982), pp. 1–19.

This article offers an art historian's perspective on how and why to study objects, but it has been widely used and applied beyond that discipline. As this was published back in the early 1980s, it also helps us to understand the development of material culture studies as an interdisciplinary field of enquiry. Prown's approach addresses the different stages of object-based research. There are many different protocols for studying artefacts and they typically reflect the priorities of the discipline of origin. Some other examples include: E. McClung Fleming, 'Artifact Study: A Proposed Model', *Winterthur Portfolio*, 9 (1974), pp. 153–73; Gregg Finley, 'The Gothic Revival and the Victorian Church in New Brunswick: Toward a Strategy for Material Culture Research', *Material Culture Review*, 32 (1990), pp. 1–16; Robert Elliot et al., 'Towards a Material History Methodology', in S. M. Pearce (ed.), *Interpreting Objects and Collections* (London: Routledge, 1994), pp. 109–24.

Material culture histories

Lorna Weatherill, 'A Possession of One's Own: Women and Consumer Behaviour in England, 1660–1740', *Journal of British Studies*, 25:2 (1986), pp. 131–56.

This study is an excellent example of the first phase of historical studies based on material culture questions and sources. However, crucially, Weatherill's engagement with objects is through texts, in this case the probate inventories of many individual households that, collectively, provide insight into larger patterns of possession. This article also raises the question of gender, looking to material culture to help understand the different cultural values men and women placed on the things in their homes in an era of starkly unequal gender

relations, especially concerning property. The themes and questions raised in this groundbreaking article have shaped the many studies of gender and material culture that have come since. Hannah Greig, Jane Hamlett and Leonie Hannan (eds), *Gender and Material Culture in Britain Since 1600* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015) brings together classic works on this aspect of the field.

Ana Lucia Araujo, *The Gift: How Objects of Prestige Shaped the Atlantic Slave Trade and Colonialism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023).

Araujo's recent book aims to show how relationships between Africans and Europeans in the era of slavery can be rethought when considered through gifts exchanged between them. She argues that the exchange of prestigious objects was critical in the negotiation of power by Africans and Europeans as the transatlantic slave trade and colonialism developed. The book follows the journey of a ceremonial sword commissioned in France and presented to an African agent in Cabinda, in the Kingdom of Ngoyo (in present-day Angola). The sword was then taken by traders in the enslaved to Abomey (present-day Benin) and was later looted by French soldiers and brought to France. The book draws on many different types of source, from objects themselves to archival texts in French, English and Portuguese. As such it not only demonstrates clearly how a material approach – in this case the study of gifts – can contribute entirely new perspectives to the historiography, but also how it is possible to blend different types of historical sources to create an argument.

Lisa N. Trivedi, *Clothing Gandhi's Nation: Homespun and Modern India* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2007).

Trivedi's *Clothing Gandhi's Nation* is another good example of how a material focus can contribute new insights to major historical themes, in this case, nationalism, modernity, race and imperialism. Trivedi demonstrates how an ordinary object – *khadi*, home-spun, home-woven cloth – became a symbol of the Indian nation, creating 'a common visual vocabulary' to bind together a diverse population with distinct languages, religions, castes, classes and regional backgrounds. She explores the cloth's links to the *swadeshi* movement that sought to create Indian self-sufficiency, independent from British imports. Another book focused on textiles is Giorgio Riello, *Cotton: The Fabric That Made the Modern World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), which illuminates the globalized economy fuelled by this popular textile from 1750 onwards. In part, this is a study of a commodity and, in that sense, builds on the classic anthropological collection of essays, Arjun Appadurai (ed.), *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986). However, it also engages with themes of industrialization, technological innovation and the role of the transatlantic slave trade. By following the object, or – in this case – the product, complex networks of social relations are revealed.

Recent directions in material culture studies

Margot C. Finn, 'Material Turns in British History. I-IV', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 28–31 (2018, 2019, 2020, 2021).

Margot Finn, as President of the Royal Historical Society, published a series of articles on 'Material Turns in British History' based on her annual presidential lectures. The articles are subtitled: I – Loot; II – Corruption, Imperial Power, Princely Politics and Gifts Gone Rogue; III – Collecting: Colonial Bombay, Basra, Baghdad and the Enlightenment Museum; IV – Empire in India, Cancel Cultures and the Country House. Drawing on her specialism as a historian of empire, Finn sets out in each article to make historiographical interventions by employing a material perspective. She clearly demonstrates through these articles how a material culture approach disrupts the hierarchies traditionally prioritized by historians. In the 2019 article (II – Corruption), for example, she reexamines the Colebrooke scandal in the late 1820s to demonstrate how attention to gifts and gifting practices offers new insights into this diplomatic incident, one that brings the role of women (both South Asian and British) to the fore.

Stephanie Downes, Sally Holloway and Sarah Randles (eds), *Feeling Things: Objects and Emotions Through History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).

This book's treatment of objects and emotions responds to the wider changes brought to the discipline by the 'affective turn'. The editors' aim is to develop a cross-disciplinary theoretical framework for examining the emotional significance of things in premodern Europe. In line with the majority of work in material culture history, questions of agency are central. Katie Barclay, *The History of Emotions: A Student's Guide to Methods and Sources* (London: Bloomsbury, 2020) provides an excellent introduction to the history of emotions more broadly. Both books speak to the fact that historical scholarship is increasingly locating connections between objects, bodies, senses, feelings and environments.

Conclusion

This list, of course, is partial. New studies are published all the time, and this significant seam of historical interest is, in turn, influenced by wider developments across the discipline and beyond. Our engagements with the material are also changing in a period of accelerating digital mediation. With mass digitization, the scope of what it is possible to research and to what extent has widened, but with this expansion, methods have had to adapt, and rapidly. In this context, the kind of hands-on object analysis described in our chapter in the second edition of *A Practical Guide to Studying*

History: Skill and Approaches might seem old-fashioned. Nonetheless, as this bibliography emphasizes, direct research on artefacts and images has not lost its analytical value, quite the opposite. These tactile and intensive methods continue to provide researchers with important contact with the material life of the past.

Additional citations

- Arjun Appadurai (ed.), *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986).
- Katie Barclay, *The History of Emotions: A Student's Guide to Methods and Sources* (London: Bloomsbury, 2020).
- Robert Elliot et al., 'Towards a Material History Methodology' in S. M. Pearce (ed.), *Interpreting Objects and Collections* (London: Routledge, 1994), pp. 109–24.
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- Giorgio Riello, *Cotton: The Fabric That Made the Modern World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).