HISTORY from THINGS

Essays on Material Culture

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The Truth of Material Culture: History or Fiction?

Jules David Prown

Material culture is just what it says it is—namely, the manifestations of culture through material productions. And the study of material culture is the study of material to understand culture, to discover the beliefs—the values, ideas, attitudes, and assumptions—of a particular community or society at a given time. The underlying premise is that human-made objects reflect, consciously or unconsciously, directly or indirectly, the beliefs of the individuals who commissioned, fabricated, purchased, or used them and, by extension, the beliefs of the larger society to which these individuals belonged. Material culture is thus an object-based branch of cultural anthropology or cultural history.

What material do we study in material culture? Obviously we study things made by human

beings—a hammer, a card table, a plow, a teapot, a microscope, a house, a painting, a city. But we also study natural objects that have been modified by human beings—stones arranged into a wall, a garden, a prepared meal, a tattooed body. We may even study unmodified natural objects, as Cyril Stanley Smith has done, to understand better the relationship between the structure of human-made things and the structure of natural things in the physical universe in which we live.

Objects made or modified by humans are clumped together under the term *artifact*. That word connects two words—*art* and *fact*—reflecting its double Latin root. The word *art* derives from *ars*, *artis* (skill in joining), and *fact* derives through *factum* (deed or act) from *facere* (to make or to do), emphasizing the utilitarian meaning already implicit in the word *art;* thus, skill or knowledge is applied to the making of a thing. This verbal conjunction introduces an issue that often derails material culture discussions, namely the relationship between artifacts and art. The term *art* refers to objects whose primary initial purpose has been to represent, to memorialize, to induce veneration, elevation or contemplation, to provide access to or influence supernatural forces, to delight the eye, or otherwise to affect human thought or behavior through visual means. Many cultures do not have a special category of objects identified as art. In our culture, art is what we say is art, including ethnographic and technological objects that were not created as art but that have been aestheticized by being placed in museums or other special collections.

There are two ways to view the relationship between art and artifact—inclusive and exclusive. The inclusive approach asserts that just as the word *art* is incorporated in the word *artifact*, so too are all works of art, as fabricated objects, by definition artifacts. Some even hold that the terms are interchangeable. Several years ago the art historian Irving Lavin of the Institute for Advanced Study set forth a series of what he termed "assumptions" about art, leading to a definition of art history.[1] "The first assumption," he wrote, "is that anything man made is a work of art, even the lowliest and most purely functional object." For Lavin, and for an increasing number of art historians, art is equatable with artifacts, the material of material culture.

Several scholars have observed that any artifact—and the inclusive view would mean any work of art as well—is a historical event. This brings me to the first part of this paper's subtitle—history. An artifact is something that happened in the past, but, unlike other historical events, it continues to exist in our own time. Artifacts constitute the only class of

historical events that occurred in the past but survive into the present. They can be reexperienced; they are authentic, primary historical material available for firsthand study. Artifacts are historical evidence.

Artifacts, like other historical events, do not just happen; they are the results of causes. There are reasons why an object comes into existence in a particular configuration, is decorated with particular motifs, is made of particular materials, and has a particular color and texture. Peter Gay, in the introduction to his book *Art and Act*, identified three types of historical causation that apply to artifacts just as to other historical events. These he calls craft, culture, and privacy. The first, craft, refers to tradition. Things are done or made in the way they were done or made previously. This is obviously true about artifacts whose artists and craftspeople are trained in art schools or apprenticeships, learn from design books, and learn from other objects. The second type of causation, culture, refers to the mind of contemporary culture—prevailing attitudes, customs, or beliefs that condition the ways in which things are said, done, or made. It refers to the world in which both maker and consumer lived and which affected their values. People are a product of their time and place. The third causal factor, privacy, refers to the individual psychological makeup of the person who made the object; it might be entirely conformist and therefore reflective of contemporary society, or it might be quirky or eccentric, producing an original, novel, or idiosyncratic result.

The objective of a cultural investigation is mind—belief—the belief of individuals and the belief of groups of individuals, of societies. There are surface beliefs, beliefs of which people are aware and which they express in what they say, do, and make, and there are beliefs that are hidden, submerged. If we may return to etymology for a moment, beliefs that are on the surface are *sur-face* or *super-ficial* (on the face). The cultural analyst wants to get at hidden beliefs, at what lies behind surface appearance, behind the mask of the face. What lurks behind the face is our quarry—mind. A culture's most fundamental beliefs are often so widely understood, so generally shared and accepted, that they never need to be stated. They are therefore invisible to outsiders. Indeed, they may be beliefs of which the culture itself is not aware, and some of them may be so hard to face that they are repressed.

Mind, whether individual or cultural, does not reveal itself fully in overt expression; it hides things from others, and it hides things from itself. It can express itself in complex or elliptical ways. Just as some of the secrets of the physical world cannot be observed directly but only through

representations—DNA, quarks, black holes—so secrets of the mental world—the world of belief—are manifest only in representations. Dreams are one example of the representations of hidden mind, of the expression of meaning in masked form. The capacity of human beings to process the unnoticed material of daily life into fictions that surface in dreams suggests to me that human beings constantly create fictions unconsciously, using the language of fiction—simile, metonomy, synecdoche, metaphor. I wish to suggest that like dreams artifacts are, in addition to their intended function, unconscious representations of hidden mind, of belief. If so, then artifacts may reveal deeper cultural truth if interpreted as fictions rather than as history. I realize that an analogy between dreams and artifacts as expressions of subconscious mind is not self-evident; indeed, it seems unlikely. Let me develop the case further.

Because underlying cultural assumptions and beliefs are taken for granted or repressed, they are not visible in what a society says, or does, or makes—its self-conscious expressions. They are, however, detectable in the way things are said, or done, or made—that is, in their style. The analysis of style, I believe, is one key to cultural understanding.[2] What do I mean by style? The configuration of a single object is its form. When groups of objects share formal characteristics, those resemblances or resonances constitute style. In the practice of art history, the study of those characteristics is called formal or stylistic analysis. When it is used in practice to discriminate between objects, it is often called connoisseurship. That term is unfortunately maligned because it seems to smack of preciousness and elitism. But in fact connoisseurship is a powerful scholarly tool, permitting rapid distinctions between what is true and what is false. I know of no other field of historical inquiry in which it is possible to achieve such rapid and precise analytical results as connoisseurship, which enables an analyst to say immediately and with assurance that this chair is Philadelphia, 1760–70, made by X, or this chest is Essex County, Massachusetts, probably Ipswich, about 1670, from the workshop of Y, or this table is a forgery, a cultural lie.

Whereas iconography, the analysis of subject matter, serves an art historian well in discerning and tracking linkages of objects across time and space, the analysis of style facilitates the identification of difference, of elements that are specific to a place, a time, a maker. Why is this so? Because form is the great summarizer, the concretion of belief in abstract form. A chair is Philadelphia of the 1760s because it embodies elements of what was believed in Philadelphia in the 1760s, and that formal pattern is what enables an analyst to determine the truth of the chair. It follows logically that formal patterns should also allow an analyst to reverse the process: to consider the beliefs, the patterns of mind, materialized in the chair. Instead of analyzing the concrete formal expressions of belief to determine the authenticity of the chair, the concrete formal expressions of an authentic chair are analyzed to get at belief. When style is shared by clusters of objects in a time and place, it is akin to a cultural daydream expressing unspoken beliefs. Human minds are inhabited by a matrix of feelings, sensations, intuitions, and understandings that are nonverbal or preverbal, and in any given culture many of these are shared, held in common. Perhaps if we had access to a culture's dream world, we could discover and analyze some of these hidden beliefs. In the absence of that, I suggest that some of these beliefs are encapsulated in the form of things, and there they can be discerned and analyzed.

Style is most informative about underlying beliefs when their expression is least self-conscious, and a society is less self-conscious in what it makes, especially such utilitarian objects as houses, furniture, and pots, than in what it says or does, which is necessarily conscious and intentional. Purposive expressions—for example, a diplomatic communique or an advertisement—may be intended to deceive as well as to inform. It is just here that the inclusive approach accepting a close linkage or even identification between art and artifact causes problems. The function of art is to communicate—whether to instruct, record, moralize, influence, or please. In this abstract mode of operation it resembles literature more than it does other physical artifacts. It is self-conscious, intentional expression. An icon of Saint Francis of Assisi or a representation of the Madonna and Child may be intended to arouse religious sentiments, to persuade, or even to convert; a portrait may be intended to flatter. Art may be true or deceptive; in either case it is intentional. Works of art are conscious expressions of belief, fictions composed of a vocabulary of line and color, light and texture, enriched by tropes and metaphors. As cultural evidence, works of art have many of the same liabilities as verbal fictions with their attendant problems of intentionality. The distinction between art and artifact is that artifacts do not lie. That is an exaggerated way to put it, but it makes the point. Card tables and teapots, hammers and telephones—all have specific functional programs that are constants, and the variables of style through which the program is realized are unmediated, unconscious expressions of cultural value and beliefs.

However, it is in what we call art—whether painting, sculpture, litera-

ture, theater, dance, music, or other modes of aesthetic expression—that societies have expressly articulated their beliefs. Because material culturalists are interested in objects as expressions of belief and because art is specifically material that is expressive of belief, it would be absurd to exclude art from material culture. Although we may attach special importance to uncovering deep structures of belief that may underlie the conscious, articulated top layer of belief, we cannot simply exclude the most obvious expressions of belief—art, literature, and so forth—from cultural analysis because they are self-conscious. So if an inclusive approach that identifies art and artifact closely is unsatisfactory, so too is an exclusive approach that would pry art completely away from artifacts as unsuitable for material culture analysis.

For those of us who think that as material culturists we are "doing history" with objects, it is a sobering corrective to realize that in one sense history consistently uses small truths to build large untruths. History can never completely retrieve the past with all its rich complexity, not only of events but of emotions and sensations and spirit. We retrieve only the facts of what transpired; we do not retrieve the feel, the affective totality, of what it was like to be alive in the past. History is necessarily false; it has to be. On the other hand, literature can weave small fictions into profound and true insights regarding the human condition. It can recreate the experience of deeply felt moments and move us profoundly. It can trace inexorable patterns of cause and effect in fiction and concentrate the largest universal truths into myth.[3]

I suggest, then, that deep structural meanings of artifacts can be sprung loose by going beyond cataloguing them as historical facts to analyzing them as fictions, specifically artistic fictions. While hierarchically art is a subcategory of artifact, analytically it is useful to treat artifacts as if they were works of art. Viewing all objects as fictions reduces the distinction between art and artifacts.

As an example, I will analyze a single artifact (fig. 1). This object is 6⅜ inches high, 4¾ inches wide at the widest part of the body, and 7⅞ inches wide from spout tip to handle. It is wider than it is high and could be inscribed within a rectangle. The primary material is pewter, although the handle and lower ring of the finial are of wood. There is a small hole in the top of the lid, and inside the vessel there is a circular arrangement of small holes where the spout joins the body.

The vessel is divided by a horizontal line three-fifths of the way up where the lid rests on the body. The lid and the body also are subdivided

Fig. 1. Teapot, pewter. Thomas Danforth III (American, c. 1777–c. 1818). Yale University Art Gallery, Mabel Brady Garvan Collection.

by horizontal moldings, the lower one exactly midway between the base and the top of the handle and at a height exactly equal to the total height of the lid. Viewed from the side the object presents a series of S-curves, including the handle, the spout, and the outlines of the body, the lid, and the finial. The spout and the handle rise above the rim. The vessel stands on a raised base ⅜ inch high.

Seen from the top (fig. 2), the object presents a series of concentric circles surrounding the finial. The spout, finial, hole, hinge, and handle are aligned to form an axis through the vessel at its largest dimension.

The object consists of five separate parts—lid, body, handle, spout, and finial. The lower section of the body is a flattened ball, the upper part

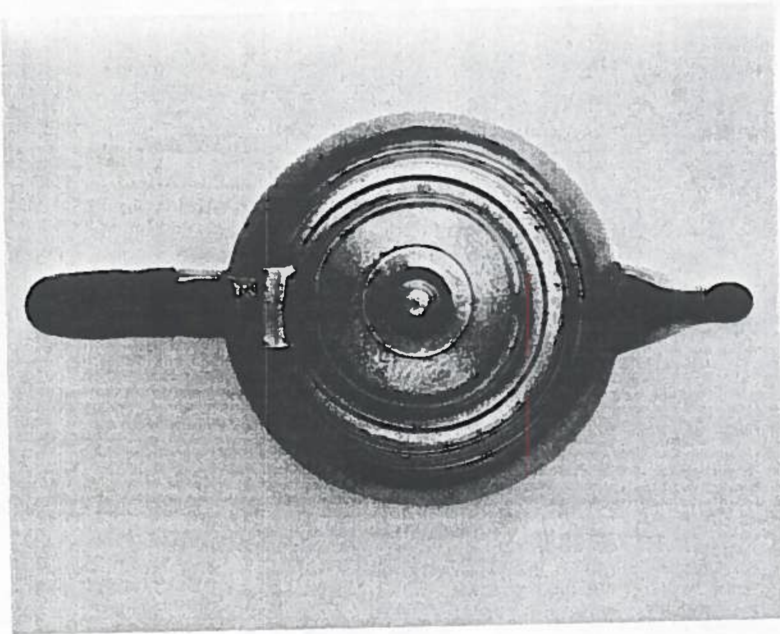

Fig. 2. Detail of pewter teapot by Danforth. Yale University Art Gallery, Mabel Brady Garvan Collection.

a reel. The lid is bell-shaped and surmounted by a finial that echoes in simplified form the shape of the vessel—a flattened ball surmounted by a reel, with a hemisphere above.

Setting aside previous knowledge, it could nonetheless be deduced that this hollow-bodied object is a vessel or container, that the larger opening at the top revealed when the lid is opened is used to put some substance into the vessel, and that the spout is used to redirect that substance into a smaller container. The small holes in the body at the base of the spout suggest that the contained substance is strained in the act of pouring to retain in the vessel particles larger than the holes. The fact that the spout rises above the rim suggests that the substance contained is liquid, since if the spout were below the rim, liquid would overflow when the vessel were full. The use of wood in the handle and in the finial, which is grasped to open the lid, suggests that the liquid may be hot, since wood

is not as good a conductor of heat as metal. The fact that an attached rim raises the bottom of the pot off the surface on which it stands also suggests that the contents may be hot.

Manipulating the object suggests the use of the handle and the finial. Opening the lid indicates that the finial makes contact with the handle, and the absence of wear suggests that the handle, and perhaps the finial disk as well, is a replacement. The bell shape of the lid suggests sound, and actual sound results from opening and closing the lid.

When respondents have been asked to express their feelings about this object following extended analysis, they have used such words as "solid," "substantial," "cheerful," "comfortable," "grandmotherly," and "reliable." The object evokes recollections, and the identification of the links between the object and the memories of experience for which it stands as a sign is the key to unlocking the cultural belief embedded in it. If you ask what in the object triggered such words as "solid," "substantial," and "reliable," respondents will note that the object is wider than it is high and that the flattened ball of the lower part gives it a squarish and bottom-weighted appearance, suggesting stability. The responses are based on experience of the phenomenal world. The words "cheerful," "comfortable," and "grandmotherly" reflect more subjective life experiences that also can be located with some precision by asking questions based on the previously deduced evidence. Under what circumstances do we drink warm liquids? When we are cold, warm liquid warms us inside; when we are hot, it causes perspiration that evaporates, cooling the body surface. We drink hot liquids when we are ill—soup or tea—again because they make us feel better, perhaps by promoting perspiration and helping break a fever. When we are ill and incapacitated, warm liquids are often brought to us, and the care of another person is comforting. Hot liquids are also drunk on social occasions. Drinking coffee and tea is marked by a sense of well-being that derives from the stimulation of the drink itself, by the physical act of giving or pouring and receiving, and frequently by conversation. Drinking hot liquids and talking seem to go together.

James Fernandez has written of the importance of metaphor to anthropologists in decoding culture, a process he referred to punningly as "an-trope-ology."[4] Although he was discussing verbal metaphors, several of his discriminations are applicable as well to the understanding of how artifacts function as metaphorical expressions of culture. He distinguishes between two kinds of metaphor—structural metaphors, which conform to the shape of experience and thus resemble actual objects in the physical

world, and textual metaphors, which are similar to the feelings of experience. Structural metaphors are based on physical experience of the phenomenal world; textual metaphors are based on the emotive experience of living in that world.

The object, which we can now refer to as a teapot since our analysis of it is complete, invokes multiple textual metaphors—cheerful, comfortable, reliable, grandmotherly, and so forth—metaphors based on the feelings of experience. It also embodies structural metaphors based on the shape of experience. The lid and finial, for example, can be read as a bell metaphor. And the bell shape suggests calling—whether by a dinner bell or ringing from a sick bed—calling for and receiving help or comfort or sustenance. Another structural metaphor, equally obvious, is less easily retrieved, however, perhaps because repressed. If you ask the respondent (or the analyst asks him- or herself) to identify the Ur-experience, the earliest human experience of ingesting warm liquids, the immediate response is as a baby feeding from a mother's breast. Structural analogies between the shape of the lower section of the body of the vessel and the female breast now become evident. And when the object is viewed from above, with the finial at the center like a nipple, the object is even more breastlike (fig. 2). The teapot is revealed, unexpectedly, as a structural metaphor for the female breast.

Fernandez defines a metaphor as a sign, a combination of image and idea located between a signal and a symbol, between perception and conception. A signal invokes a simple perception that orients some kind of action or interaction. A picture of a teapot could function literally as a signal hanging outside a tea room beckoning the tourist to enter; at a tea party the teapot itself serves as a signal for pouring and serving. At the other end of the scale, a symbol triggers a conception whose meaning is fully realized. A common denominator linking the various circumstances cited earlier in which warm liquids are ingested is that all involve an act of giving and receiving, which is, in its largest social sense, the act of charity.[5] A teapot, fully conceptualized in meaning, could become a symbol of the act of giving, of charity. One can envision a page in an emblem book with an image of a teapot, a symbol of charity, and an accompanying moralizing text.

Located between signal, a simple perception, and symbol, a fully realized conception, the teapot by itself stands as a sign, a metaphor both structural and textual. It embodies deeply felt but unconceptualized meanings relating to giving and receiving, to such things as maternal love and

care, oral gratification, satisfaction of hunger and thirst, comforting internal warmth when cold or ill, and conviviality. And it is thus as a sign or metaphor that the teapot works as evidence of cultural belief.

If artifacts express culture metaphorically, what kinds of insight can they afford us? What, for example, does the teapot tell us about belief? The object has given us a clue that the drinking of tea, and perhaps the entire ceremony of tea drinking, may be related metaphorically to the fundamental human act of giving and receiving and has the potential of being a symbol of generosity or charity, of *caritas*. The humanness as well as the humaneness of the act is suggested in this teapot by the fact that the liquid is encased in an organic, breastlike form. But, as we well know, a teapot can be precisely the opposite in form (fig. 3); it can deny the humanly anatomical or personal aspect of giving, or charity, and by using purely inorganic, intellectual, geometric forms deny personal involvement and emphasize the cerebral character of the act. In so doing it conveys something about the different character of a different culture.[6]

The fundamental structural linkage of warm liquids, breast feeding, and charity—the human metaphor—suggested to us by our study of a single teapot is now understood to be a formal potential for all vessels used to pour out hot liquids. The extent to which it is generated, tolerated, or rejected by a culture is an index of one aspect of that culture's belief. Objects are evidence, and material culture enables us to interpret the culture that produced them in subjective, affective ways unachievable through written records alone. They did not write much about breasts in the late eighteenth century, and even less about the linkage between breasts and charity, but the metaphorical language of teapots conveys a livelier and perhaps truer picture. What we have perceived in the teapot are indicators of beliefs about giving and receiving, generosity, charity, and definitions of the self in relation to others. Can one go on to describe with greater precision the terrain of cultural belief expressed by artifacts? The most persistent metaphors in objects of which I have become aware relate to such fundamental human experiences as mortality and death; love, sexuality, and gender roles; privacy (seeing and being seen) and communication; power or control and acceptance; fear and danger; and, as here, giving and receiving.

Metaphors, Fernandez says, locate beliefs in what he calls the "quality space" of a culture.[7] Among several formulations he noted as to how metaphors locate belief is one that accords closely with the polarities of belief I have encountered in my analysis of American artifacts, that articulated by

Fig. 3. Teapot, silver. Loring Bailey (American, 1740–1814). Hood Museum of Art, Dartmouth College, Hanover, N.H. Gift of Frank L. Harrington, Class of 1924.

W. T. Jones as seven "axes of bias."[8] These "axes" are lines of predisposition, along the calibration of which beliefs are situated. They are static-dynamic, order-disorder, discreteness-continuity, process-spontaneity, sharp-soft, outer-inner, and other world–this world. (The first term in each opposition cited applies more to the neoclassical Bailey teapot, the second to the Danforth teapot, but in varying degrees). I wonder whether it would not be possible to graph these points, an admittedly subjective exercise, to arrive at abstractions of artifacts that would constitute a type of cultural fingerprint.

It should be understood that the analysis of artifacts as fictions to discover otherwise unexpressed cultural beliefs does not so much answer questions as raise them. Artifacts make us aware affectively of attitudes

and values; they provide only limited amounts of data. In the language of semiotics, they are artistic signs articulating a climate of belief; they are often poor informational signs. But the questions they pose are authentic ones, arising from the primary evidence of the artifact rather than being imposed by the investigator.

If artifacts materialize belief, then it follows that when a society undergoes a traumatic change, that change should manifest itself artifactually. Perhaps the most clearly defined moment of social change in our country occurred at the time of transition from colony to nation; that is the change signalled in the configuration of these two teapots.[9] We can corroborate the connection by looking at two stylistically similar expressions in a different type of object. A pre-Revolution New York Chippendale or rococo card table (fig. 4) is irregular, organic, curvilinear, jutting into and penetrated by ambient space, heavy, and decorated with carved leafage, shells, claw and ball feet, and rope gadrooning. It has wells for counters, recesses at the corners for candlesticks, a drawer to hold cards and counters, and a baize cover to protect the surface, make it easier to pick up cards, and keep them from sliding. A post-Revolution Federal or classical revival card table (fig. 5) is regular, geometrical, self-contained, light in weight and structure, and decorated on its smooth veneered surfaces with inlaid images of flowers and eagles. It has three fixed and one fly leg; two sides have legs in the center, and two sides are open. Questions arise. Did women in dresses tend to sit at the open sides and men in trousers take the sides with the center legs, which they could straddle? If so, if two men and two women played, the player across the table was always of the opposite sex. In the games played, was the opposing player a partner or an adversary, or was each player out for him- or herself? A player at a Chippendale table (fig. 4) is drawn into closer physical proximity to the other players, in part because the sides, although bowed in the center, are recessed from the corners. The sensation of closeness is especially pervasive if one is forced to circle one's legs around the solid protruding cabriole leg in the center of three of the four sides, becoming literally wrapped up with the table. The other players are near, their faces loom large, their voices are close, their aromas are pervasive, as is the warmth and smell of the candles at either elbow. There is a sense of intimacy, of coziness, reinforced by the warmth of the nearby candles, the soft baize covering, and a sheltered trove of private wealth in a well—a kind of security, like food in a bowl or money in one's pocket.

We are aware of the reality of physical substances—the sturdiness

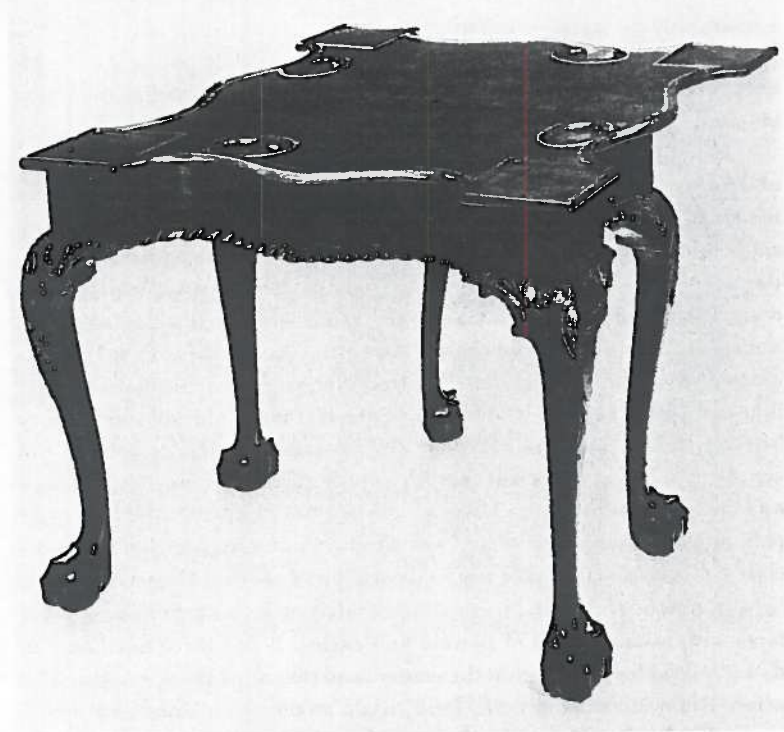

Fig. 4. Card table (American, New York, 1760–70). Yale University Art Gallery, Mabel Brady Garvan Collection.

and weight of the table, the solidity of elements carved of mahogany that replicate organic elements in the natural world, such as rope carvings, leafage, shells, and claws clutching balls. We are comforted by the real, natural environment of substantial, tangible things. The functionalism of the table is reassuring. Places are carved out for candlesticks, counters, even players. The sinuous curves of solid organic forms that surround the player suggest not only the natural world but also the complexity of human relations within that world. Deviousness might be a natural and not unfriendly part of the game—it is a fact of life, like sinuous curves in

Fig. 5. Card table (American, Massachusetts, 1785–1815). Yale University Art Gallery, Mabel Brady Garvan Collection.

nature. The table suggests a culture in which value is placed on and pleasure derived from substantial things—the realities of the world and of life as well as warm, complex, intimate human relations.

The Federal card table (fig. 5) seems to substitute the mental for the physical, fragility for substantiality, intellectual geometry for organic complexity, aloofness for intimacy. Forms are slender and orderly; surfaces

are sheer and planar; clarity and regularity replace complexity and sinuousness. The decorative elements on Federal card tables tend not to be real things but pictures of things—inlay—abstract images rather than the things themselves. Projecting sides often serve to keep each player at a slight distance from the table. The players are thus farther away from each other. Objects on the table surface are less secure, less rooted, set on a flat, all-purpose surface rather than nestled into designed concavities. The entire enterprise is cooler, more distant, more abstract, and in a sense more tentative, less friendly. It is almost as if at the Chippendale table one tries to win real property from intimates, to put their goods in your pocket, while at the Federal table one attempts to win intellectual supremacy over adversaries and perhaps money in a more abstract form.

An investigation now could go in many directions; a particularly promising one would be a study to see whether the actual games played during the pre-Revolution and post-Revolution periods changed and how these changes, if any, related to relations between men and women, ideas about independence and authority, private and corporate entrepreneurship, generosity and greed, hostility and friendship, and a host of other attitudes, values, and beliefs imbedded in the artifacts and acted out in the games people played.

Obviously not all belief can be retrieved. An artifact is embedded in its culture and embodies some of that culture's beliefs. We are deeply embedded in another culture, and our understandings are colored by its beliefs. One great advantage of the study of material culture is the extent to which it provides a way to overcome the problem of cultural perspective by establishing the broadest possible base of commonality. A society we would study had its set of beliefs, its culture, while we who would seek to understand that culture are the products not only of a different cultural environment but of a complex of cultural environments. Each of us is pervaded by the beliefs of our own particular groups—nationality, place of residence, class, religion, politics, occupation, gender, age, race, ethnicity, and so forth. We all have biases of which we are not aware, convictions that we accept as unquestioningly as the air we breathe. The issue that haunts all cultural studies is whether it is possible for us to step outside our own cultural givens, our own time and place, and interpret the evidence of another culture objectively—that is, in terms of the individuals and society who produced it rather than in our own terms. If not—if we are irredeemably biased by our own unconscious beliefs, if we are hopelessly culture-bound to our own time and place—then all efforts to interpret other cultures should be avoided since our interpretations will inevitably be distorted.

The problem is a problem of mind. We are trying to understand another culture whose patterns of belief, whose mind, is different from our own. Our own beliefs, our mindset, biases our view. It would be ideal, and this is not as silly as it sounds, if we could approach that other culture mindlessly, at least while we gather our data. This is the great promise of material culture: By undertaking cultural interpretation through artifacts, we engage the other culture in the first instance not with our minds, the seat of our cultural biases, but with our senses. Figuratively speaking, we put ourselves inside the bodies of the individuals who made or used these objects; we see with their eyes and touch with their hands. To identify with people from the past or from other places empathetically through the senses is clearly a different way of engaging them than abstractly through the reading of written words. Instead of our minds making intellectual contact with their minds, our senses make affective contact with their sensory experience.

Certainly it is true that sense perceptions filtered through the brain may also be culturally conditioned. But although commonality of sense perception cannot be proven either empirically or philosophically, certain conclusions can be drawn on the basis of the shared neuro-physiological apparatus of all human beings, which is not culturally specific and has evolved only slowly over time, and also from the inescapable commonalities of life as lived. All humans undergo a passage from birth, through nurturing and aging, to death. En route they experience the realities of the physical world: gravity, a sense of up and down, an awareness of night and day, of straight, curved, and crooked, of enclosure and exclusion. Through the channels of the senses they taste sweet, sour, and bitter; smell the acrid and the fragrant; hear sounds loud and quiet; perceive through touch the difference between rough and smooth, hot and cold, wet and dry; and see colors and shapes. They know hunger and thirst, illness and health, pain, sexual passion, bodily functions, loss and discovery, laughter and real tears. The human body constantly provides a sense of scale. It all adds up to a tremendous body of experience that is common and transcultural. This experience is transformed into belief that finds material expression in artifacts, the analysis of which—material culture—provides privileged paths of access for us to an under-

standing of other peoples and other cultures, of other times and other places.

NOTES

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1. "The Art of Art History," *Art News*, October 1983.

2. For more on this, see my "Style as Evidence," *Winterthur Portfolio* 15, no. 3 (Autumn 1980): 197–210.

3. Henry Glassie resolved this paradox by viewing history as myth, as art, in his article "Meaningful Things and Appropriate Myths: The Artifact's Place in American Studies," *Prospects* 3 (1977):1–49, reprinted in Robert Blair St. George, *Material Life in America, 1600–1860* (Northeastern University Press: Boston, 1988).

4. James Fernandez, "The Mission of Metaphor in Expressive Culture," *Current Anthropology* 15, no. 2 (June 1974):119–45.

5. The Roman legend of Cimon and Pero, known as the legend of Roman charity, tells of the daughter who visits her elderly father starving in prison. She nourishes him by feeding him from her own breast.

6. Although the Danforth teapot is in the Queen Anne style, it may well be as late in date as the Bailey teapot. One would expect that contemporaneous teapots would be similar in form, and the formal opposition of these two pots would seem to undercut the claim that difference in form conveys difference in cultural character. Apparent anomolies that arise in material culture study pose questions—What is the explanation for the formal difference of contemporary objects?—and it is precisely such questions that stimulate further investigation, new thinking, and enlarged understandings. Pursuit of the question was beyond the scope of the present paper because of time constraints, but what is involved here is a difference in technologies required by the difference in materials (the Danforth pot is pewter; the Bailey pot is silver) relating to significant differences in stylistic persistence between rural Connecticut (Danforth) and the urban Boston region (Bailey). Retention of a colonial style half a century later might well suggest a hypothesis about post-Revolution Connecticut, a particular part of Connecticut, or a particular clientele that would need to be tested more widely.

7. I am not comfortable with the spatial or topographical model for imaging cultural belief, but neither is Fernandez.

8. W. T. Jones, *The Romantic Syndrome* (Martinus Nijhoff: The Hague, 1961).

9. This section develops ideas introduced in "Style as Evidence," 200ff.