

CHAPTER 23

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MATERIAL CULTURE: ANCESTRIES AND TRAJECTORIES
IN MATERIAL CULTURE STUDIES

The point is sometimes made that, like language, material culture is a ubiquitous feature of human life. Indeed, material culture may be regarded as one of the defining characteristics of being human: it has long been a convention to assert that to be human is to speak, and to make and use tools (Miller & Tilley 1996: 5; cf. Gibson & Ingold 1993). But whereas the systematic study of language has been codified in the academic discipline of linguistics, or deconstructed in literary and translation studies, it is interesting to note that no equivalent discipline has emerged to address the systematic study of human artifacts. The study of material culture has, rather, been scattered across a number of disciplines, and, as a result, is presented as a somewhat “undisciplined” field of academic inquiry.

In the inaugural editorial of the *Journal of Material Culture*, something of a manifesto for contemporary material culture studies, these undisciplined possibilities were embraced by the editors as an advantage. As well as offering an array of new issues to explore, and methodologies to draw upon, this would encourage “the cross-fertilization of ideas and approaches between people concerned with the material constitution of social relations”, and ensure a commitment to “a politics of inclusion” (Miller & Tilley 1996: 5–6). Thus conceived, material culture studies is said to thrive “as a rather undisciplined substitute for a discipline” (Miller 2010: 1), unfettered by the conservatism that can blight established disciplines, “with their boundary-maintaining devices, institutional structures, accepted texts, methodologies, internal debates and circumscribed areas of study” (Miller & Tilley 1996: 5).

The interdisciplinarity of approaches to material culture studies seems to be born out in practice: among the contributors to the *Journal of*

Material Culture are to be found geographers and historians, archaeologists and museologists, sociologists and psychologists, art historians and students of design, as well as anthropologists. Yet, despite this eclecticism, the claim that material culture studies has “no obvious genealogy of ancestors”, “no obvious disciplinary home” (Miller & Tilley 1996: 5), can be questioned and its position in relation to the broader anthropological project reassessed.

An objective of the first half of this chapter is, therefore, to trace something of the anthropological pedigree of the study of material culture. To acknowledge this heritage is not to undermine the cross-fertilization characteristic of contemporary material culture studies, but it does enable us to recognize that this is a significant area in which anthropological ideas and approaches have taken root and have been influential in shaping wider academic debates within, between, and across disciplinary orientations. Due to the limitations of space, this will necessarily be a partial history, and one that foregrounds the development of the influential “school” of material culture studies associated with the Department of Anthropology at University College London (the editorial base of the *Journal of Material Culture*). There are, of course, other ancestors and lineages that a more comprehensive account would need to explore, not least greater attention to distinct Continental and North American traditions. The chapter is not, however, intended primarily as a historical contribution. Hence, the second part goes on to discuss some of the more important trends and debates within material culture studies today.

PART I: ANCESTRIES

THE RISE AND FALL OF MUSEUM ANTHROPOLOGY

The association between anthropology and material culture studies can be traced to the very origins of the anthropological discipline (origins that are largely shared with at times congruent, at times convergent, disciplines such as ethnology, archaeology, and folklore studies). Indeed, anthropology was a museum discipline prior to its migration to the university. As such, the collection, classification, and analysis of material culture lay at the heart of anthropological studies throughout its

development late in the nineteenth century and early in the twentieth, with many of the founders of academic anthropology also holding museum positions. This “museum period” in anthropological history (Sturtevant 1969: 622) was also the era of “salvage ethnography”, during which there was a concern to rescue what were perceived to be the surviving vestiges of “primitive societies” before they were either transformed or made extinct by the relentless march of “civilization” in the form of Western colonialism. At this time vast collections of ethnographic materials were assembled, both through museum-sponsored collecting expeditions and via an expanding trade in ethnographic specimens supplied through colonial networks (Thomas 1991; Corbey 2000; Gosden & Knowles 2001).

The histories of ethnographic collecting and the museological origins of professional anthropology have been well researched and documented in recent years (e.g. Stocking 1985; Ames 1992; Coombes 1994; O’Hanlon & Welsch 2000; Shelton 2001a, 2001b; Penny 2002; Gosden & Larson 2007). Regarded, in turn, as laboratories for anthropological theorizing, showcases of empire, and halls for the edification of the public, the ethnographic museum fulfilled multiple functions and became the chief site through which knowledge of colonized peoples was both constructed and displayed (Cohn 1996), their collections providing “the empirical basis for grand schemes of social evolution, diffusion, acculturation and change” (Tilley et al 2006: 2). Within the dominant cultural-evolutionist paradigm late in the nineteenth century, for example, ethnographic artifacts acted as indices of the evolutionary status of different societies and provided a tantalizing glimpse into Western society’s own “prehistoric” past – a classic instance of the “denial of coevalness” discussed by Fabian (1983) that then clouded the anthropological imagination. A result of this was a continuing contiguity between ethnographic and archaeological collections in Western museums at a time when anthropology and archaeology were, as yet, indistinguishable academic disciplines (Gosden 1999).

A sense of the prevailing attitudes and complex interactions between material culture collections, anthropological knowledge construction, modes of colonial governance and exploitation, and the competitive display of

imperial prestige in this period, is conveyed by the government anthropologist, Northcote Thomas (1906: vi), in the preface of a book series he edited in 1906–07 concerned with “The Native Races of the British Empire”:

Germany awoke many years ago to the importance of the study of native races from a political and commercial, no less than from a scientific point of view. In twenty-five years the Berlin Museum [i.e. the Museum für Völkerkunde, founded by Adolf Bastian in 1873] has accumulated ethnographic collections more than ten times as large as those of the British Museum, and the work of collection goes on incessantly. England, with the greatest colonial empire which the world has ever seen, lags far behind. Money will perhaps be forthcoming in England for work in anthropology when savage life and savage culture has disappeared for ever from the earth before the onward march of so-called civilisation. If, one hundred years hence, English anthropologists have to go to Germany to study the remains of those who were once our subject races, we shall owe this humiliation to the supineness of England at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth century. The past, once lost, can never be recovered; we have before us, in the subject races of our Empire, a living memorial of the past, and if England does her duty, she will lose no time in organising an Imperial Bureau of Ethnology, and thus enable English anthropologists to hold up their heads before their more fortunate German and American brethren.

This passage speaks volumes about the collusions between anthropology, colonialism, and evolutionist ideology at the turn of the twentieth century (Asad 1973; Kuklick 1991: 182–241; Thomas 1994). It also demonstrates how central ethnographic collections and museums were to this project (Bennett 2004). Pressing the case for the introduction of an Imperial Bureau of Ethnology, Thomas alludes not only to the remarkable collections being assembled in Germany, but also to the state-sponsored

collecting activities of the Bureau of Ethnology in the US, which had been authorized by Congress in 1879 and was instrumental in the development of anthropology as an academic discipline in that country. Regardless of the inertia of the British government in this respect, the next generation of British anthropologists had a rather different project in mind of course, one that would widen the gap between British and American schools of anthropology, not least in their stance towards material culture.

In Britain, then, according to the discipline's own origin myth, the definitive closure of the era of museum anthropology came with the functionalist revolution of Bronisław Malinowski and Radcliffe-Brown in the 1920s, and its associated emphases on social structure and the method of participant-observation (Young 1979; Kuper 1983; Stocking 1984; 1995). Despite amassing a substantial collection of Trobriand material culture while engaged in his paradigm-shifting fieldwork between 1915 and 1918 (see Young 2000), Malinowski was keen to distance himself and his new school of social anthropology from what he (1930: 408) characterized as "antiquarian anthropology", with its institutional base in the museum. He (1935: 460) inveighed against what he regarded as the "purely technical enthusiasm" of the museum ethnologists, dismissing their "fetishistic reverence" for material culture as "scientifically sterile".

Yet it is possible to overstate Malinowski's rejection of the study of material culture; or, rather, to take Malinowski's own overstatement out of the polemical context in which it was expressed. Few students of material culture today would disagree with his declamations against the evolutionary assumptions and diffusionist theories "born of the dust and welter" of Victorian ethnographic museums and epitomized in the comments of Northcote Thomas (Young 2000: 183). In fact, most would agree with the argument with which Malinowski (1922: 80) prefaces his discussion of the Trobriand canoe in *Argonauts of the Western Pacific*: whilst a canoe, as "an item of material culture", "can be described, photographed and even bodily transported into a museum", the "ethnographic reality" of the canoe "lives in the life of its sailors" and in the lives of those for whom it is more than "a mere bit of shaped matter" (1922: 80). Malinowski's argument is simply that

a technical analysis of material culture is not in itself adequate, and that the canoe needs to be understood in its social context. As such, Malinowski's account of the Trobriand canoe, or his (1935) later analysis of the construction of the *Bwayma* yam storehouse in *Coral Gardens and their Magic*, might be regarded as exemplary studies in material culture of their period.

Indeed, the continuing significance of material culture is evident in the work of many of those associated with the functionalist and structural-functionalist schools of British social anthropology: Firth's life-long interest in Pacific art (e.g. 1925; 1936; 1947; 1973); Evans-Pritchard's analysis of cattle, or the spatial dimensions of kinship, in Nuer society (1940; 1951); Richards' examination of land, labor, and food among the Bemba (1939). The fact that a discussion of material culture was relegated to an appendix of Radcliffe-Brown's classic *The Andaman Islanders* (1922) is sometimes taken as evidence of the declining interest in this field (Tilley et al 2007: 2); yet, equally, the fact that a lengthy appendix was included also suggests a continuing engagement or, at the very least, ambivalence.

TRANSATLANTIC GENEALOGIES

Whereas Malinowski and his students at the London School of Economics (LSE), who would go on to form the mainstream of British social anthropology, spurned the nineteenth-century conceptualization of anthropology as "a comprehensive science of man", there were, of course, others who pursued this project. In the US, under the influence of Franz Boas, anthropology had remained a much broader subject, embracing the four sub-fields of biological or physical anthropology, socio-cultural anthropology, archaeology, and linguistic anthropology (see Vann *infra*). Firmly rooted in the European ethnological tradition, Boas had originally served as Adolf Bastian's assistant at the Museum für Völkerkunde in Berlin, and, after emigrating to the United States, held positions at Chicago's Field Museum and the American Museum of Natural History before taking up a lectureship in anthropology at Columbia University. Much like Malinowski's students in Britain, Boas's students would go on to establish anthropology departments throughout the US; the most strongly Boasian school being that established by Alfred Kroeber at the University of California. Kroeber

became both Professor of Anthropology at Berkeley and Director of the University of California's Museum of Anthropology, and his reputation rested equally on his cultural-anthropological and archaeological fieldwork.

Together with Robert Lowie, another of Boas's students who came to Berkeley in 1917 after several years at the American Museum of Natural History, Kroeber created a highly influential school of anthropology that retained the breadth so reviled by the British social anthropologists. Among Kroeber's and Lowie's students was Julian Steward, for example, whose work marked a shift away from Boasian diffusionism, but for whom material culture remained central in his concept of cultural ecology, which explored the relationships between environment, technology, and social organization (Steward 1955). Steward retained an archaeological and museum-orientated focus through much of his career, not least while based at the Bureau of American Ethnology and the Smithsonian Institution (Kerns 2003). Later, appointed as Professor of Anthropology at Columbia, Steward went on to supervise another generation of anthropologists such as Sidney Mintz, Eric Wolf, and Roy Rappaport, who have all been influential on material culture studies. Mintz's *Sweetness and Power* (1986), for example, had a key influence on the rise of consumption studies in material culture.

The distinct trajectories of academic anthropology in Britain and the US did find synthesis in one particular individual, however, and this would have a significant impact on the development of material culture studies. That individual is Daryll Forde, the founder of the Department of Anthropology at University College London (UCL). Forde's academic training was multidisciplinary, with an undergraduate degree in geography, a doctorate in prehistorical archaeology (obtained while lecturing in geography at UCL), and two years as a postdoctoral fellow in the Department of Anthropology at Berkeley, where he worked closely with Kroeber and Lowie. Forde's synthetic approach, embracing geography, anthropology, archaeology, and cultural ecology, with a strong focus on technology and environmental adaptation, is articulated in his *Habitat, Economy and Society* (Forde 1934).

ANTHROPOLOGY AND MATERIAL CULTURE STUDIES AT UCL

In 1945, when he became the first Professor of Anthropology at UCL, Forde deliberately set about establishing a department that would provide an alternative to the British social anthropology tradition associated with the LSE. As such he followed the American four-field approach, initially teaching social and physical anthropology in the department, while courses in linguistics and archaeology were provided by other institutions within the University of London (the School of African and Oriental Studies and the Institute of Archaeology respectively). All students were taught courses on “primitive technology”, for which Forde assembled a material culture collection within the department. This was supplemented with collections-based teaching from colleagues in the Department of Ethnography at the British Museum, notably the Keeper of Ethnography, Adrian Digby, and his Assistant Keeper, Bryan Cranstone (who would later become Curator of the Pitt Rivers Museum, Oxford). Regarded by those within Malinowski’s circle as “a human geographer with ethnological interests” (Fortes 1976: 459), Forde nevertheless earned their respect, not least through his long service as Director of the International African Institute. Forde also served as President of the Royal Anthropological Institute between 1947 and 1949, and he used the opportunity of his 1948 presidential address to again press for the reintegration of the discipline. It was, he (Forde 1948: 4) argued, the capacity of anthropology to provide “an integrative framework for the study of human groups” that distinguished the discipline from narrower sociological perspectives: a framework that integrated biological, environmental, and technological factors alongside the economic and political in the analysis “of form and function in human cultures, social systems and bodies of belief”.

This integrative approach was reinforced at the UCL department with the appointment of Peter Ucko, in 1962, as the first permanent lecturer specializing in primitive technology. Ucko completed a first degree in anthropology at UCL in 1959, before transferring to the Institute of Archaeology to write a Ph.D. on prehistoric human figurines. He would continue to bridge anthropological and archaeological worlds throughout his career, subsequently becoming Director of the Australian Institute of

Aboriginal Studies, founder of the World Archaeological Congress, and Director of the Institute of Archaeology (by then incorporated within UCL). During his ten years of teaching at the UCL department, Ucko succeeded in transforming an inherited focus on primitive technologies into a broader approach to material culture studies, including teaching courses, with Anthony Forge, on the anthropology of art, and convening a series of interdisciplinary research seminars that would lead to influential edited volumes such as *The Domestication and Exploitation of Plants and Animals* (Ucko & Dimbleby 1969) and *Man, Settlement and Urbanism* (Ucko, Tringham and Dimbleby 1972).

Although demonstrating the masculinist bias typical of the era (Buchli 2002: 11), Ucko's Curl Lecture of 1969 is widely regarded as a key text of contemporary material culture studies. Like Forde before him, Ucko (1969: 27) argued against the trend that had made the study of material culture "the poor handmaiden of other aspects of anthropology". Using the example of the penis sheath, he (1969: 61) showed how a particular category of material object could open up "many areas of investigation of interest to a wide range of anthropological enquiry". Significantly, he (1969: 29–30) defended the value of "morphological studies" and the study of "technological processes" alongside analyses of the social function and context of material culture. He (1969: 30–1) also stressed the importance of cross-cultural analyses (including both synchronic and diachronic comparisons), which were by then long out of favor among British social anthropologists.

After Ucko's departure for Australia in 1972, it was left to one of his students, Michael Rowlands, then a newly-recruited lecturer, to fight for the survival of material culture studies in the UCL department, at a time when it was dominated by social anthropologists. Through the 1970s and early 1980s, with the recruiting of John Gledhill, Barbara Bender, and Daniel Miller, the current reputation and distinctiveness of UCL material culture studies was, however, beginning to assert itself. By the middle of the 1990s, joined by Susanne Küchler, Howard Morphy, and Christopher Tilley, and with the launch of the *Journal of Material Culture* in 1996, it was firmly

established. As Victor Buchli (2002: 1–2) notes in the introduction to an edited collection of the group’s work, this distinctiveness emerged from the confluence of a number of influential tributaries: the Fordean legacy within UCL anthropology (Ucko); Marxist-inspired social archaeology, originally associated with Gordon Childe, at London’s Institute of Archaeology (Rowlands, Bender); anthropological studies of art and aesthetics associated with Anthony Forge and his student Alfred Gell at the LSE (Morphy, Küchler, Pinney); and emergent structuralist and post-structuralist schools of anthropological archaeology that coalesced around Ian Hodder at Cambridge from the late 1970s to the early 1990s (Miller, Tilley, Buchli).

PART II: TRAJECTORIES

Having explored something of the genealogy of contemporary material culture studies, with a particular focus on the development of the influential school that emerged at UCL, the objective of the second part of this chapter is to introduce a number of key debates in the field. To give a sense of the shifting focus of these debates, and the dynamics of their interaction, these might be approached as a series of intersecting trajectories. A more comprehensive survey of the field is provided in the recently-published *Handbook of Material Culture* (Tilley et al 2006). One task of the present, more modest discussion is to signal some of the accepted texts in material culture studies, questioning again the claim that material culture escapes such disciplinary conventions.

FROM EXCHANGE TO ENTANGLEMENT: THE SOCIAL LIFE OF THINGS

Given his trumpeted antipathy towards material culture, it is ironic that Malinowski perhaps did most to place the transaction of things at the center of social anthropological research. Prior to his study of the *kula* in *Argonauts* (Malinowski 1922), anthropologists had shown scant interest in the mechanisms of exchange in small-scale societies, regarding it generally as primitive forms of commerce akin to barter (e.g. Seligman 1910). The significance of Malinowski’s work was its recognition of both the complex sophistication of such exchange systems and the ways in which they function to create and maintain relationships within and between social

groups. One legacy of Malinowski's work has been its capacity to inspire later generations of anthropologists to revisit this paradigmatic case study, reinterpreting it in the light of subsequent social and economic theories and, indeed, reanalyzing *kula* exchange to develop new theories of reciprocity, relationality, and value (e.g. Mauss 1924; Leach and Leach 1983; Munn 1986; Strathern 1988; Weiner 1992; see Gregory *infra*).

Together with *Argonauts*, Marcel Mauss's "Essai sur le don" (1924; *The Gift*, 1952) was significant in establishing gift exchange as a core concern of social anthropology. Written partly in response to Malinowski's study, Mauss was interested in examining the distinctions between pre-industrial clan-based societies and Western industrial societies through their exchange practices, identifying different forms of exchange with different stages in societal evolution. In this way, Mauss contrasted the transactions of "societies of the gift", which are characterized by the exchange of objects that are inalienably associated with the gift-giver and entail a moral responsibility to reciprocate, with "commodity transactions" between self-interested individuals in which objects are alienable and defined by their use or exchange value. As Carrier (2006: 376–377) notes, according to this convention, gift societies "are orientated toward the social reproduction of people ... as members and embodiments of kin groups", whereas "commodity societies are orientated toward the social production of things", of objects that are separate from people and relationships.

By the middle of the 1970s, with the rise in structural Marxist, feminist, and postcolonial anthropology, there was a desire to reconsider exchange theory and question some of its, by now, taken-for-granted assumptions, including the conventional dichotomization between gifts and commodities. In this context, one critique was to challenge the strong sociological orientation in much analysis of exchange systems (a Maussian legacy), and call for a return to a more object-centered approach. In the introduction to *The Social Life of Things*, a canonical work in material culture studies if ever there was one, Arjun Appadurai (1986: 5) posits that the observation "that things have no meanings apart from those that human transactions, attributions, and motivations endow them with" is not in itself

particularly illuminating. Instead, he (1986: 5) argues, we must “follow the things themselves” in order to grasp the meanings that are “inscribed in their forms, their uses, their trajectories”. It is only through engaging with these trajectories “that we can interpret the human transactions and calculations that enliven things” (1986: 5). Indeed, it can be argued that it is this theoretical and methodological turn towards understanding “things” as “things-in-motion” that, in part, distinguishes contemporary anthropological approaches to material culture from other disciplinary perspectives.

Drawing inspiration from Simmel, and acknowledging that value is not an inherent property of objects but rather emerges reciprocally through exchange, Appadurai is concerned with tracing the circulation of things as they pass through different spatial and temporal “regimes of value”. These regimes may or may not equate with other cultural boundaries, and the circulation of things may involve different kinds of pathways, diversions, and trajectories, perhaps entailing multiple processes of commoditization and decommoditization. In this way, objects may be said to have “life histories” and, methodologically, Appadurai and his colleagues promote a “biographical” approach to studying their various translations and transformations. In contrast to a social-historical approach, which may examine the development of classes or types of things, or may consider larger-scale dynamics, a cultural-biography approach “is appropriate to specific things, as they move through different hands, contexts and uses” (Appadurai 1986: 34; see also Hoskins 2006). In his important contribution to *The Social Life of Things*, Igor Kopytoff provides a succinct demonstration of the value of this approach:

Biographies of things can make salient what otherwise might remain obscure. For example, in situations of culture contact, they can show what anthropologists have so often stressed: that what is significant about the adoption of alien objects – as of alien ideas – is not the fact that they are adopted, but the way they are culturally redefined and put to use. The biography of a car in Africa would reveal a wealth of cultural

data: the way it was acquired, how and from whom the money was assembled to pay for it, the relationship of the seller to the buyer, the uses to which the car is regularly put, the identity of its most frequent passengers and of those who borrow it, the frequency of borrowing, the garages to which it is taken and the owner's relation to the mechanics, the movement of the car from hand to hand over the years, and in the end, when the car collapses, the final disposition of its remains. All of these details would reveal an entirely different biography from that of a middle-class American, or Navajo, or French peasant car. (Kopytoff 1986: 67; for an elaboration of such an analysis, see Miller 2001a.)

The project, begun in *The Social Life of Things*, of reevaluating the relationship between material culture and exchange theory, continues in socio-cultural anthropology, with researchers engaging increasingly with the *materiality* of exchange valuables alongside their social function in reciprocity or their purely symbolic meanings (e.g. Myers 2001a).

As the ethnographic focus of anthropologists has shifted to embrace what Appadurai (1990) has characterized as the "new global cultural economy", with its array of complex, overlapping, and disjunctive "ethnoscapes", "mediascapes", "financescapes", and "ideoscapes", so the metaphor of "entanglement" becomes more appropriate than that of the balanced reciprocity connoted by "exchange". Indeed, an increasing number of anthropologists have recognized that transcultural complexity at a global scale is nothing new and have criticized anthropological discourses that have constructed such "unitary conceptions" as gift economies, arguing instead that indigenous economies have long been entangled in other systems, not least colonial trade. Thus, Nicholas Thomas, in *Entangled Objects* (1991), explores the impact of colonialism on the dynamics of indigenous exchange practices in the Pacific. Arguing for the "promiscuity" of objects, in which European things are appropriated into indigenous exchange systems (as both gifts and commodities), and indigenous things are appropriated by Europeans (to fill, for example, those ethnographic

museums discussed earlier), Thomas criticizes the very notion of “the gift” and its part in the colonial and anthropological construction of the alterity of colonized peoples and places.

FROM MIND TO BODY, FROM SIGNIFICATION TO THE SENSES

As Christopher Tilley (2006: 7) argues, “it is impossible to imagine either the existence of a notion of materiality or a field labelling itself material culture studies” without reference to the “foundational” theoretical perspectives of Marxism, structuralism, and phenomenology. Whilst Marxist perspectives have grounded the study of material culture in relation to material resources, labor, production, consumption, and exchange, structuralist and semiotic approaches have stressed issues of cognition, symbolism, and representation. And, whilst structuralist and post-structuralist perspectives have engaged with material culture as if it was a text, a system of significations, that could be read, interpreted, and deconstructed, phenomenological approaches have emphasized the experiencing body over the thinking mind, and have encouraged ethnographic attention to multi-sensory engagements with the material world (e.g. Howes 2003; Edwards, Gosden & Phillips 2006).

Whilst the dominance of Marxist and structuralist schools in socio-cultural anthropology (including material culture studies) has passed, their legacy continues in many areas of material culture studies, not least in discussions of gift and commodity exchange (see Gregory *infra*), and theories of objectification (see below). Structuralist analyses have long been out of fashion, yet interesting work continues to be generated by material culture scholars drawing upon linguistic and textual analogies. For example, while Tilley has become a major proponent of phenomenological approaches to material culture studies, notably in relation to landscape, his explorations of metaphor and material culture, and his pursuit of the Lévi-Straussian idea of the “science of the concrete”, have also opened up new ways of understanding how and what objects mean. On the one hand, Tilley (1999: 103) defends the value of semiotic and symbolic approaches: an artifact, “through its silent ‘speech’ and ‘written’ presence”, thus “speaks what cannot be spoken, writes what cannot be written, and articulates that which

remains conceptually separated in social practice". On the other hand, however, he resists a purely mentalist conceptualization of the world, recognizing that even linguistic metaphors are grounded in the human body and in bodily experiences. Examining transformations in the anthropomorphic form of Melanesian canoes, for example, Tilley (1999: 129) argues that "contemporary canoe building involves the material surfacing and articulation of a series of material metaphors bound up with the creation of social identities and intertwined male and female essences". This is not merely about the expressiveness of symbolic form. In a social world constituted by extreme male–female sexual antagonism, the canoe performs active metaphorical work by resolving, or at least containing, gendered contradictions in social life that cannot be discussed in language or negotiated in social practice (1999: 130).

Just as Tilley, alongside Ian Hodder and Michael Shanks, was responsible for introducing a generation of archaeologists to structuralist and post-structuralist theory (e.g. Hodder 1986; Shanks and Tilley 1987; Tilley 1990; Shanks 1992), so his *A Phenomenology of Landscape* (1994) has introduced the phenomenological thought of Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty, to recent archaeological and anthropological engagements with space, place, and landscape. Whereas Tilley's skill is in applying social and philosophical theory to ethnographic contexts (his work often involves reinterpreting existing ethnographic data in the light of fresh theoretical perspectives), Tim Ingold's "phenomenological" approach arises from ethnographic experience and his reflections on livelihood, dwelling, skill, and environment (Ingold 2000a). Thus, when it comes to landscape, it is to the nature of dwelling that Ingold turns. Critiquing the visual approach that sometimes characterizes landscape studies, Ingold reminds us that we more often perceive the landscape as participants than as spectators, and that the tasks in which we participate are temporally-bound. Landscape may therefore be regarded as "taskscape", "a pattern of activities 'collapsed' into an array of features" (Ingold 1993: 162). Landscape is an embodiment of those tasks, and experienced by the whole body, its contours and features felt through our "muscular consciousness" as much as perceived through the senses (1993:

167). Ingold does not, however, attend only to human tasks and perceptions, and part of his argument is to recognize the coexistence of multiple temporalities in the landscape: the human taskscape in relation to the cyclical temporalities of the seasons, for example, or to the geological processes that have shaped the surface of the world, the make up of its soils and habitats.

In a frequently-cited article, "On weaving a basket" (2000b), Ingold criticizes the very notion of material culture, seeing it as a reification of the dichotomy between nature and culture. Here he seeks to break down commonsensical oppositions between naturally-occurring forms and human artifacts, and to shift attention away from issues of meaning and form, issues of "culture as opposed to materiality" (Ingold 2000b: 340). He thus questions the distinction between "making" (culture) and "growing" (nature) by considering the *generation* of form as a reciprocal and muscular dialogue between, in this case, weavers and the qualities of the fibers that they bend and interweave. According to Ingold (2000b: 342), "the form of the basket emerges through a pattern of skilled movement", and, just as routine patterns of (human and non-human) activity congeal into the features of the landscape, so the artifact "is the crystallisation of activity within a relational field", the regularities of the form of the basket, for instance, "embodying the regularities of movement that gave rise to it" (2000b: 345). Elsewhere, Ingold explores how skills are learned, and he argues that this is not chiefly through instruction, observation, or imitation, but through repeated trial and error working with the materials: it is the body that learns through practice, and without recourse to language.

OBJECTIFICATION: FROM ALIENATION TO INCORPORATION

This emphasis on practical rather than discursive knowledge is central to the work of the French anthropologist and sociologist, Pierre Bourdieu. Synthesizing Marxism, structuralism and phenomenology, his "theory of practice" has been a major influence in contemporary material culture studies. Bourdieu's most celebrated concept, elaborated in *Esquisse d'une théorie de la pratique* (1972; *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, 1977), is a reworking of the idea of "habitus", introduced into anthropology by Mauss

(1936). Bourdieu has defined habitus as a system of “durable, transposable dispositions” (1977: 72), a “mental and corporeal schemata of perceptions, appreciations, and action”, and a “generative principle of regulated improvisations” (1977: 78). In many respects, habitus links the notions of habit (behavior patterns acquired through routine practice) and habitat, insofar as it is through the internalization of the physical and social environment that people inhabit that they are socialized and acquire these dispositions.

From a material culture point of view, Bourdieu’s classic example of habitus is his discussion of the Kabyle house (1970). The article at first reads like classic structuralist analysis, in which the spatial organization of the house reproduces (and at times reverses) a series of symbolic, gendered oppositions that structure Kabyle cosmology. However, Bourdieu demonstrates that this structure is malleable and contingent on the changing movements and perspectives of the Kabyle themselves. He found that meanings were not rigidly determined by some theoretical, disembodied structure of difference, but were generated by people themselves through their everyday practices and habits. Bourdieu went on to explore how Kabyle forms of thought and action were inculcated through the “implicit pedagogy” of habitus. Just as the Kabyle shape their houses, so the house shapes the Kabyle. This process, which Bourdieu (1977: 72) refers to as “the dialectic of the internalization of externality and the externalization of internality” (or “incorporation” and “objectification”), has clear ramifications for the study of material culture.

Indeed, this dialectic may be said to be at the heart of contemporary material culture studies, providing a way of understanding the relationship between subjects and objects, and overcoming their conventional opposition in Western thought. A large body of anthropological research has demonstrated the cultural specificity of regarding “objects” as essentially non-human, inert and passive, in contradistinction to human subjects, which are alive and have agency. Consequently, the theoretical direction of much work in contemporary material culture studies has been to question this dichotomy and argue that subjects and objects are not separate domains at

all, but in fact co-constitutive of one another. Things are not merely expressive of subjective states or unconscious mental structures; human subjectivities are not merely the products of particular material environments. Rather, persons and things exist in dynamic relation. As Tilley (2006: 61) puts it, “material forms do not simply mirror pre-existing social distinctions, sets of ideas or symbolic systems. They are instead the very medium through which these values, ideas and social distinctions are constantly reproduced and legitimized, or transformed”. Through making, using, exchanging, consuming, interacting, and living with things, people make themselves.

This principle has been developed by Daniel Miller in a large and influential body of work concerned with objectification and consumption (e.g. 1987, 1994). The thrust of Miller’s work is to reevaluate the role of material goods in modern societies and in the production of social selves. Whilst acknowledging that people are socialized in particular cultural contexts through their routine engagements with their material world, he is particularly interested in understanding how people come to identify with and take possession of this culture, which subjects perceive to be external to themselves. Rather than it being a passive process, Miller argues that people actively appropriate the culture in which they find themselves through consumption, and in so doing they internalize and incorporate it into their identities. Central to Miller’s theory of consumption, however, is a Hegelian concern with the “movement by which society re-appropriates its own external form” and thereby assimilates its own culture (Miller 1994: 17). This entails a process of alienation and re-appropriation, as subjects initially see the world and its objects as outside and alien to them, but subsequently recognize these externalities as part of their own social being. This moment of recognition entails the subject reincorporating that which was held to be external and other into itself: a collapsing of the subject–object divide. For Miller (1987: 193), then, consumption becomes the everyday site of a struggle “to appropriate goods and services made in alienating circumstances and transform them into inalienable culture”. In a prodigious output, Miller and his students have grounded these somewhat abstract

arguments in a wide variety of ethnographic contexts, including studies of cars, clothes, personal possessions, mobile phones, and – to borrow Miller’s intentionally-irreverent phrasing – lots of other “stuff” (e.g. Miller 2001a, 2001b, 2010; Küchler & Miller 2005; Horst & Miller 2006).

FROM PRIMITIVISM TO PRACTICE: ANTHROPOLOGIES OF ART

As Miller’s work might suggest, a material culture perspective has been applied to virtually every aspect of human life and in a diversity of regional and temporal contexts. Its reach has extended far beyond the realm of “things” to engage with the materialities of, for example, landscape (e.g. Bender 1993; Bender & Winer 2001; Hirsh & O’Hanlon 1995; Feld & Basso 1997), architecture (e.g. Blier 1987; Buchli 1999), and social memory (e.g. Bahloul 1996; Sutton 2001; de Jong & Rowlands 2007). In the final section of this part of the chapter, I should like to turn to a category of material culture that has retained a somewhat distinct trajectory within anthropological studies: that of art. As with material culture, art was an important part of the broader anthropological project in the formative years of the discipline, but became marginalized, at least in Britain, with the shift toward functionalism and structural-functionalism in the 1920s and 30s. Whilst there were exceptions to this trend, not least in the work of Raymond Firth in the UK and Melville Herskovits, a student of Boas, in the US (e.g. Herskovits & Herskovitz 1934; Redfield, Herskovits & Ekholm 1959), for many years the anthropology of art was relegated to the margins of the discipline.

The revival of interest in art in the 1960s can be explained by a number of factors, reflecting both theoretical developments within anthropology and the influence of anthropology in other disciplines including art history. Thus, with the increasing prominence of structuralist and semiotic approaches, there was a renewed anthropological interest in symbolism and the aesthetics of ritual process (e.g. Turner 1967), and hence a renewed interest in indigenous art objects used in ritual contexts. Anthony Forge’s (1967, 1973) studies of Abelam art and artists, and Nancy Munn’s (1973) work on Walbiri iconography are classics of this ethnographic genre. By the later 1970s, ethnographic studies of indigenous arts were well established, typically focusing on the distinctiveness of indigenous

aesthetics and “ways of seeing”, as well as questions of communication, representation, and meaning (Coote & Shelton 1992).

The anthropological study of aesthetics is concerned with investigating the culturally-specific effects that formal qualities such as shape, texture, light, and shade have on the senses. There has been some debate among anthropologists as to whether aesthetics constitutes a cross-cultural category (e.g. Ingold 1996). Howard Morphy argues that it is likely that humans universally sense some aesthetic effects – dullness and luster, for instance, or symmetry and asymmetry – but that these are experienced and interpreted differently according to cultural and social context. In his work on Yolngu art, for example, Morphy (1992: 182–3) observes that artists are clearly “concerned to produce effects on the senses by which the success of the work can be judged”, yet while Europeans might interpret this as an aesthetic effect, the Yolngu would interpret it “as a manifestation of ancestral power emanating from the ancestral past”.

Closely related to aesthetics are issues of form, style, and meaning. Indeed, Morphy and Perkins (2006: 323) argue that “Art can usefully be approached as the intervention and experience of expressive and meaningful forms in the context of human social action”:

The form of objects is what creates their affective potential and in part explains their meaningfulness and impact in context. Forms are a resource, forms have histories, forms may identify groups or regions, epochs, religious identities, castes and class. Form can be used to trace relationships over time, to identify cultural trajectories, to research processes of transmission, to demonstrate or problematize the boundaries around social entities. (2006: 323)

Such is the potential of a consideration of art in wider anthropological analyses of societies. And yet, as Nicholas Thomas (2001: 1) observes, the field remains “‘curiously’ situated” in relation to the discipline (2001: 1). What is curious for Thomas (2001: 1) is the failure of the anthropology of art to engage with “emerging preoccupations with the politics of art, cross-cultural relations, and representation”, and its

continued confinement “not merely to ‘non-Western’ societies but more particularly to certain tribal or formerly tribal peoples, in other words to those formerly identified as ‘primitive’”. Whilst museum ethnographers and anthropologists of art have attempted to restyle their object of study as “world art”, “indigenous art”, or “the art of small scale societies”, it is the specter of primitivism that persistently haunts their endeavors.

A critique of the role of anthropology in the construction of the category of “primitive art” and its popularization through ethnographic museums and exhibitions formed part of the wider “reflexive turn” in the discipline in the 1980s. Two prominent exhibitions of the time were “‘Primitivism’ in 20th Century Art: Affinities in the Tribal and the Modern” (Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1984) and “ART/Artifact: African Art in Anthropology Collections” (Museum for African Art, New York, 1988). They provoked the so-called “primitivism debate” among anthropologists, art historians, and curators that has subsequently extended into a broader postcolonial (self-)interrogation of Western practices of cultural representation and appropriation (see Clifford 1988; Danto 1988; Vogel 1988; Price 1989; Gell 1996). These debates have shaped contemporary museological practices, involving a re-evaluation of museum and “source community” relationships and an attempt to engage in more collaborative forms of curatorial and exhibition practices in partnership with representatives of indigenous and colonized populations (e.g. Kreps 2003; Peers & Brown 2003; Karp et al 2006; Sherman 2008; Sleeper-Smith 2009). Despite these attempts to challenge Western anthropological and curatorial power, the aestheticization of the “primitive other” continues to be a dominant mode of ethnographic display, as evidenced in the exhibitionary approach of the recently opened Musée du quai Branly in Paris (Price 2007; Dias 2008; Shelton 2009).

One way in which anthropologists have side-stepped the seemingly intractable problematics of these material and ideological legacies has been, again, to stress the entanglement of non-Western objects within global flows, and to return agency to indigenous communities by acknowledging that such flows are two-way processes. In his book *Possessions* (1999), for

example, Thomas attempts to shift dominant views of indigenous art by exploring visual culture as a site of unpredictable cultural exchange in which contemporary indigenous artists do not see themselves as the victims of Western appropriations, but instead freely incorporate Western art traditions within their own artistic innovation, experimenting with new media and materials, whilst affirming ancestral values and their distinct heritage. Alternatively, North American anthropologists and art historians such as Fred Myers, Christopher Steiner, and Ruth Phillips have escaped “purist” concerns with indigenous aesthetics and form by placing emphasis on the circulation of art objects in the different regimes of value represented by institutions such as art markets, museums, galleries, and critical writing (Steiner 1994; Marcus & Myers 1995; Phillips & Steiner 1999; Myers 2001a). From this perspective, “Art is not just another example of material culture” (Myers 2001b: 29), suitable for cross-cultural analysis, but is inextricable from these particular institutions and the means through which they produce particular hierarchies of value. As Marcus and Myers (1995: 1) state in the introduction to their influential collection, *The Traffic in Culture*, “In contrast to a previous paradigmatic anthropology of art that was concerned principally with mediating non-Western objects and aesthetics to Western audiences, the work here engages Western art worlds themselves, casting a critical light on mediation itself”.

Such an approach calls for a renegotiation of the relationship between art and anthropology, and acknowledges that “anthropology is itself implicated with the very subject matter that it wants to make its object of study” (Marcus and Meyers 1995: 1). Whereas the focus of this renegotiation has been to shift attention again to consumption practices (and their relation to the production of cultural difference in terms of ethnicity and class), an alternative trajectory has been to negotiate the relationships between practices of production in art and in anthropology. That is, to explore “the similarities and differences between artistic and anthropological methodologies and practices in representing others” (Schneider & Wright 2006: 1). This was the objective of a conference organized by Arnd Schneider and Chris Wright at London’s Tate Modern gallery in 2003 entitled

“Fieldworks: Dialogues between Art and Anthropology”. In recent years, we have thus witnessed an “ethnographic turn” in contemporary art practice, alongside an increasing interest, particularly among visual anthropologists and material culture specialists, in embracing alternative representational modes. Indeed, where once the institution of the museum was abandoned by anthropologists as moribund, it is proving once again to be a site of innovation and dynamism, where exhibition formats and digital technologies are providing new and sophisticated ways of engaging with the mediation of otherness (e.g. Basu & Macdonald 2007; Basu 2008).

A LESSON FROM THE MARGINS?

This chapter has provided a brief overview of contemporary material culture studies. A more detailed survey would certainly include a more comprehensive exploration of the relationship between anthropology and archaeology (not forgetting that archaeology remains a subdiscipline of anthropology in many North American campuses); it would widen its scope to include other schools of material culture studies, such as the French “anthropology of techniques” tradition associated with André Leroi-Gourhan, André-Georges Haudricourt, and Pierre Lemonnier (Lemonnier 1986); it would include discussion of other important theories, such as Alfred Gell’s influential work on art, agency, and enchantment (Gell 1998; Pinney & Thomas 2001). My objective has, however, been more modest: to introduce a particular field of study, yes, but also to reconsider the relationship of material culture studies and the discipline of anthropology.

Material culture studies has been presented as an undisciplined substitute for a discipline, a post-disciplinary field of study freed from the historical and institutional baggage that constrains many other academic subject areas. However, by investigating something of its ancestral roots and intellectual routes, one can clearly challenge this assertion (see also Hicks & Beaudry 2010). Material culture studies certainly has its “genealogy of ancestors” and its “accepted texts”, and these position it quite obviously within an anthropological disciplinary home. This disciplinary heritage has not, however, limited its scope or methodology, or made it any less

inclusive. Indeed, that this once-marginalized field of anthropological research has succeeded in engaging so productively with other disciplines, to influence their own material turns, and to accept their influence in return without concern for protecting its own insular integrity, is surely something to be celebrated, for it reinforces the continued value of an anthropological perspective in an era in which the relevance of the discipline itself is often questioned. There is a lesson here from the margins: perhaps anthropology as a whole should be more prepared to “undiscipline” itself to ensure its future as a vital presence within both the academy and the wider public.

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