

Preface

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The anthropological study of material culture has had a long but erratic history. In the 19th century crucible of scholarship within which "Anthropology" as a discipline was formed, the material world and the world of "things" played a central, if not defining, role. The identities of many non-western human groups, the many ethnographic identities that were being framed, were framed through the medium of material culture. Objects came to stand not only for certain ethnographic groups and archaeological cultures, but objects came to be the defining attributes of certain stages in the 19th century unilineal evolutionary schemes. In some ways, there are lingering traces of these views, and there may even be a continued unspoken reticence to engage with material culture because of these longstanding connections to what are now clearly seen as limited and limiting perspectives. Even art history has come to grips with the object fetishism that has dominated that field.

Although there are some notable early 20th century examples of anthropological studies of material culture, such as Boas' *Primitive Art*, there is little doubt that it has only been in the last several decades that material culture has been taken more seriously by anthropology as a whole. This renewed interest may, in part, be related to new theoretical frameworks, such as the symbolic and structural anthropology of the 1960s. To many, the inclusion of a study of Northwest Coast Indian art in Lévi-Strauss' 1963 *Structural Anthropology* was a significant indication of how the structuralist frame encouraged the analysis and interpretation of art and architecture as well as myth and kinship. By the 1970s, there was a notable increase in the number of compendiums concerned with the study of "primitive art", and, in some places (e.g., University College, London), there were programs being established that took material culture as a central focus of anthropological inquiry, incorporating both the ethnographic and archaeological views.

By the 1980s, the domain of material culture was being theorized in new ways. In some fields (e.g., archaeology), there has been much discussion over the "active" role of material culture: how social life and our social constructions are actively constituted by the material worlds we create, transform, and deploy. New dialogues emerged about the role of "objects" and "things", in both the societies we study and in the construction of anthropological knowledge. Because archaeology has long had a serious and deeply engaged concern with the materials of past societies being studied, archaeology has played a particularly central role in the renewed theories of material culture. Innovative links between certain theoretical perspectives, such as Marxist or structuration, and the materials of the past have been made in some archaeological and ethnoarchaeological studies. The emergence and development of historical archaeology has enhanced these material culture studies by being able, on the one hand, to use historic documentation to provide more sustained links to the past, while on the other hand, to show how the material world is not a mere reflection of the world as portrayed in texts but is, rather, a crucial and often independent - if not even contradictory - line of evidence.

The papers of this volume attest to the rich and emergent theorization of material culture, and to the diversity of materials and contexts that can be illuminated by this theorization: from Paleolithic "figurines" to the gift shops of California missions, from the 19th century

architected landscapes of colonizing British in South Africa to the contemporary use of archaeology in the construction of Mexican national identity. Most of these essays employ a view of material culture that considers it to be a dynamic if not moulding force in human daily life; while recognizing that humans are deeply involved with the symbolic worlds they construct, these essays elucidate the ways in which the strategies of symbolism are just as much material strategies. Humans, these essays argue, are symbolists and materialists simultaneously. The recursive nature of material culture and the recursive nature of the anthropological analysis of material culture are highlighted here. Just as we may consider, for example, the production of meanings by Upper Paleolithic peoples through the making, viewing, using of female figurines, we must also consider the ways in which we produce meanings for ourselves through the analysis and study of these same female figurines.

Taken together, the essays highlight what are some of the more exciting and provocative directions that material culture studies are moving. Although there may be some regret that the central question of our inquiry may be shifting away from "what do these materials mean?" to "what makes these materials interesting?", this is, for now, a question that is ultimately more anthropological, more historical, more contextual. As we probe this question, through papers such as those in this volume, it is clear that we come to grips with the processes through which humans produce meaning and through which we engage not only with the material world but with the particular historic and social situations that are "at work", in the every day as well as in the special circumstances of ceremony and ritual. By explicitly confronting our theoretical possibilities and by expanding the category of "materials" to include, as we see here, the industrial as well as the social knowledge systems, the essays in this volume open a variety of new doors onto the anthropological enterprise.