The Anthropology of Art & Material Culture

Art and material culture – things that we make, use, discard, admire, hate and struggle to understand – have long been topics of anthropological scrutiny. This course will survey anthropological theories of art and material culture with a global cross-cultural focus. Participants will examine, and become conversant, in numerous disciplinary approaches—functional, symbolic/semiotic/structuralist, aesthetic, economic, historical, and political—to the study of objects. Doing so students will think through ways of bringing these theories into a dialogue with one another, and how they do and do not articulate with indigenous perspectives. Following a discussion of early anthropological theories of decorative art, exchange and technology, the course will focus on contemporary approaches framed around such key topics such as agency, art worlds, colonial economies, cultural biography, iconoclasm, materiality, primitive art, objectification, regimes of value, repatriation, and tourist art. The course will prepare students to bring a wide array of theoretical and methodological perspectives to the study of things – from architecture to clothing, from mobile phones to clothes, from souvenirs to fine arts – among diverse communities in the Global North and South. Students will apply the range of approaches examined during the semester to explore a single object or discrete set of objects as a way to test the theories in practice. Materials in temporary and permanent displays at the Smithsonian will be central to the course.
Assignments

1. Class Participation and Attendance – 15% Students will participate in each seminar discussion. This means speaking in class, saying reasonably well thought-out things that demonstrate that you have done the assigned readings. Non-participation will result in a lower final grade in the course. If you have difficultly speaking in a group setting, I recommend writing three questions before the seminar to then ask.

2. Leading Seminar Discussion, Critical Analysis & Questions – 25% Each student will work in pairs to lead a seminar discussion. This does not mean that you will summarize the readings for the seminar, rather working together you will prepare a set of discussion questions that will be the basis for the seminar discussion. These questions are to be e-mailed to the entire seminar no later than 9 am on the day of seminar. Please feel free to involve us looking at something in NMNH as part of the seminar, bring hand-outs and or a power-point to help lead the discussion. I encourage you to be creative and critical.

3. Paper – 60% Each of you will do a research paper on a topic of your choice within the broad remit of art and material culture. This can be anything from a particular object (bicycle, iPhone 5, a Rothko painting, totem pole, the giant squid, Washington monument), an exhibit (Earth Matters, NMAA; Before and After the Horizon: Anishinaabe Artists of the Great Lakes, NMAI, etc.) or a wider phenomenon (instagram, book collecting, DYI shows, the politics of twerking, etc.). I am happy to work with you to select a topic. Having chosen a topic, using the readings for the seminar, as well as other sources, you will research and write a paper that explores the various aspects this thing along one or more of the theoretical lines we have explored.

These papers must be between 25- 30 pages (1.5 spacing and without bibliography included). On October 24 at the beginning of class an outline of the final paper is due. This outline will provide in two pages of text a sketch of the aim, scope, and method of your intended paper and include a working bibliography of relevant sources. While you can draw on materials from this syllabus, I expect that you will have done research as to what exists on the given topic. This is worth 15% of your final grade on the paper. No late outlines will be accepted. To have a successful paper I strongly advise you meeting with me to discuss your project as the semester unfolds.

For our final seminar (December 5) each member will give a short (7-10 minute) presentation of their paper. While I don’t expect your paper to be finished at this point, I do expect a coherent and well-argued presentation. These presentations are designed to create a forum for group feedback about your topic, which will improve your papers. Due to the number of people I expect us to run over during this session, please be prepared to stay a bit longer then the two hours.

The final paper is due on December 19 (before 12 midnight).

General guidelines for written assignments: Please submit assignments on time. Late work will not be accepted. All written assignments should be typed in standard fonts (12 point Times, Palatino, or Courier are recommended) with 1-inch margins. Please staple & paginate papers and put your name on each page. Please follow the citation/bibliographic format used in Current Anthropology.

I strongly advise you to read Orwell’s 1946 essay "Politics and the English Language" before you begin this and the other written assignment. Good writing takes time and thought: https://www.mtholyoke.edu/acad/intrel/orwell46.htm
4. Attendance to this seminar is mandatory and absences must be accompanied with a valid excuse (e.g. death in the family, documented illness, natural disaster).

**Other Information**

**Email Policy:** Email is a necessary evil, but it creates a false sense of social relations and allows us to become increasingly alienated from our colleagues and students. Please make every effort to call me or come by my office hours if you have questions about this class, and its assignments.

**Required texts** are available for purchase at GWU bookstore and will be made available in the GWU library. Assigned articles and chapters will be available via e-mail as PDFs on blackboard. The readings are divided between required and further reading. Further readings are intended to help provide further context for the assigned reading, and should be read by those of you leading a seminar discussion.


**Expectations:** I expect you to come to the seminar having done the readings and ready to actively discuss the topics at hand.

**Week 1 (Aug. 29) ** Orientations

During this initial meeting we will discuss the syllabus and seminar’s goals.

**Week 2 (Sept. 5) ** Object Lessons – Artifacts, Primitive Art and Museums

Within this seminar we will consider some aspects of the origins of objects – regardless of their classification – in the formation of the discipline of anthropology during the “Museum Period.” Doing so we will consider the role of art in the formation of American Anthropology, the place of collecting and the world of museums.

Further Reading:

Week 3 (Sept. 12) Colonialism, Infrastructure and Media
This week we will read Larkin’s book Signal and Noise as a way to think through the effects of colonialism, as well as the role of infrastructure and media.


Further Reading

Week 4 (Sept. 19) Making Things – Techniques, Tools and Technology
Within this seminar we look at anthropological understandings of the making of things, and its effect on the makers. Moving from Mauss’ notion of techniques, we will examine the role of technology and consider how discursive and non-discursive knowledge come together in acts of making.

As part of this seminar – please make sure to visit the exhibit Mud Masons of Mali (http://www.si.edu/Exhibitions/Details/Mud-Masons-of-Mali-4823) - it is located in the African Voices Focus Gallery on the first floor.

  o “Tools, minds and machines: An excursion in the philosophy of technology.”
  o “Society, nature and the concept of technology.”
  o “On Weaving a Basket.”

Further Reading
**Week 5  (Sept. 26)  Making Memories – Temporality, Histories and Materiality**

Examining different registers and scales (persons, houses and landscapes), within this seminar we will look at the role of things in making memories, and thus their role in framing temporality and history through their materiality.


**Further Reading**


**Week 6  (Oct. 3)  Making Value – The Fetish, Commodities and Subjects**

Within this seminar we will look at the blurring of objects and subjects as things are used, admired and hated and as they circulate through different regimes of value. To do so we will examine the fetish both as an analytic and methodological category, and the idea that things like people have biographies.


**Further Reading**


Week 7 (Oct. 10) Art Markets – Artists, Circulation, and Identities
Using Myer’s examination of the art markets around Pintupi paintings as a case study, this week we will look at artists, their paintings, and how their international circulation has transformed (and not) their value and their accompanying identities.


Further Reading

Week 8 (Oct. 18) Semiotics, Performance and Representation
Turning to Keane’s ethnography of Anakalang communities in Sumba, we will look at the intersection of words and things in the making of meaningful worlds. Doing so we will consider the role of semiotic analysis of materiality.


Further Reading


Week 9 (Oct. 24) Aesthetics, Style and the Senses
In this seminar we will consider aesthetics as a field in which style is made, the senses affected and life unfolds in different cultural settings and through a variety of different registers (cattle herding, warfare, dance, landscape and food).


The Anthropology of Art & Material Culture (Bell)

### Further Reading


**Week 10 (Oct. 31)  The Agency of Things**

A core aspect of the material (re)turn in anthropology has involved debates about the agency of things.


**Further Reading**


**Week 11 (Nov. 7)  Cultural property, Heritage and Copyright**

Focusing on Geismar’s book *Treasured Possessions* we will look at the cross-cultural issues around ownership of cultural property and heritage.


**Further Reading**

- Bell, J.A., Christen, K. and M. Turin In Press. ‘Introduction to Digital Return and the Circulation of Indigenous Knowledge.’ In *Special Issue of Museum Anthropology*
**Review, J.A. Bell, K. Christen and M. Turn (eds).**

**Week 12 (Nov. 14) Collaborative Turn**
Within this seminar we will examine the ways in which collaborative work with indigenous communities is opening up conceptions of things more widely and challenging practices and scholarly assumptions, while resulting in more innovative histories and theories.


**Further Reading**

**Week 13 (Nov. 21) American Anthropology Association – No Seminar**
**Week 14 (Nov. 28) Thanksgiving – No Seminar**
**Week 15 (Dec. 5) FINAL PRESENTATIONS (Make up for week 13)**
**Week 17 (Dec. 19) Final Papers Due**

**Top register** – (1) Sign at Highway rest stop, New Jersey Turnpike, 2008; (2) Youth being painted with ochre in preparation for a sing-sing presentation to tourists in Asaro village, Eastern Highlands, Papua New Guinea, 2011; (3) Ivory Benin mask from 16th century said to represent Idia, the mother of Oba Esigie, and worn by Oba on the hip. The top of the mask is decorated with heads representing Portuguese, who were a major ally of the Benin in the 16th century. Displayed in the British Museum and collected in 1910 by Sir Ralph Moor and purchased from C.G. Seligman; (4) Water color of a Nokia flip phone by Alexis Demetriades, 2012; (5) Close-up of a man’s forehead ornament decorated with Nassau shell, and beads collected by Dr. W.L. Abbot in 1914 on Wakde island, Dutch New Guinea and donated to NMNH.