

MULTIDISCIPLINARY DIMENSIONS IN MATERIAL HISTORY

by John J. Mannion

Sixty years have gone by since Marius Barbeau made a major plea for detailed study of European folk cultures in North America. He was speaking from the perspectives of a folklorist and museum anthropologist and urged that all aspects of the folk tradition be examined, including material history.¹ Barbeau began his work in Quebec at a time when local folk memory reached back deep into the previous century, and he and his colleagues were in the providential position of being able to observe and record first-hand a range of traditions, material or otherwise, much of which has long since been effaced. About the same time as Barbeau's pioneering efforts over six decades ago, the incipient school of regional ethnology in continental Europe had developed somewhat similar objectives. The Swedish scholar Sigurd Erixon, for example, was working out methods for recording and analyzing the material and social history of his homeland, and his seminal study of the village of Kila, begun in 1912, is a classic in European ethnological research. The enthusiastic response to Erixon's efforts, and those of his colleagues, resulted in the collection of a rich store of original data and an extensive published literature even before the last war. Most other European countries have long since followed suit.² By contrast, the generally sluggish response to Barbeau's counsel, especially in Canada, has meant a serious loss to scholarship if only because so much of our material past has been obliterated through the modernizing influences of this century. The scientific analysis of material culture, as envisioned by Barbeau, has only recently begun to blossom here.

None of the foregoing implies a dearth of publications on the material history of Canada. Since the war, and particularly over the past two decades, there has been a steady stream of books, pamphlets, and essays in this field. Although these works focus particularly on architecture, both popular and folk, and on high-style furniture, they also cover a wide range of antiquated crafts and other aspects of domestic colonial life. It is not the purpose of my presentation to review this literature, except to say that much of it is descriptive and particularistic, romantic and antiquarian. Even in Europe, however, work in material history has until recently been predominantly empirical despite the longevity of scholarship there. The emphasis on collecting, recording, classification, and inventory has faded or is now linked to a more scientific analysis of material culture. Tighter, analytical studies and a more conceptual literature have emerged and have been augmented more recently by American scholarship. It is to this literature that students of Canada's material past must turn to find fresh direction and to set new goals. Clearly the most urgent need at this juncture

is not a proliferation of mere descriptive studies but the cultivation and refinement of method, a greater standardization of procedure, the articulation of concepts, and the study of process.

MODERN APPROACHES TO MATERIAL HISTORY

Wherever it is being studied today, material history is not the preserve of any single traditional discipline. Work in this field is shared by a number of specialized subfields in the social sciences and humanities, notably art, architectural and agricultural history, cultural geography, historical archaeology, museum anthropology, folklife in folklore, and, to a limited degree, by dialectologists and social historians. The multidisciplinary nature of the study of material culture is hardly surprising considering the ubiquity and centrality of the artifact in the cultural milieu, its relative stability, its complexity, its multifunctional features, and the broad range of factors, ecological, economic, and sociocultural, involved in its production, diffusion, acceptance, longevity, and use. What is surprising is the lack of interdisciplinary cooperation among scholars sharing a common concern in analyzing the artifact as a concrete manifestation of culture. Each subfield brings to the study of material culture a distinctive approach, although there is inevitably some overlap both conceptually and methodologically.

Architecture looms large in the field of material history and engages a number of disciplines. The architectural or art historian approaches his subject with a keen eye for morphological detail and for chronology. He tends too often to restrict himself, however, to the popular, academic, or classical tradition, emphasizing high styles and architectural embellishments. A folklorist or cultural geographer would share the architectural or art historian's concern with form but would normally eschew high styles for the humbler folk structures that dominate the traditional architectural landscape. The cultural geographer would typically emphasize the spatial and ecological dimensions of folk architecture, viewing it as a manifestation of cultural diffusion and culture area and as an expression of man's relationship with the land. A folklorist might emphasize the more spiritual attributes, searching for traditional beliefs, superstitions, and other values associated with relict buildings, but paying less attention than either the geographer or historian to chronology and antecedent forms. No discipline would normally adopt a synthesizing approach and attempt to relate the architectural system to the wider social and economic context in which it originated and operated, or still operates.

The lines that segregate traditional disciplines, indistinct and artificial though they may be, have inhibited the development of a synthetic study of artifacts, a fact reflected in the fitful and eclectic evolution of concepts and methods in this field. This situation has been further compounded by the

narrow chauvinism that has until recently characterized European regional ethnology, where international cooperation and exchanges of ideas were severely limited.³ Scholars, frustrated in the isolation of their subfields, have sometimes argued for a fully integrated, independent discipline of material culture. This has, in fact, occurred to a certain extent in Europe, where substantial research centres focusing on material history have evolved. Such institutes are usually located in folk museums rather than in universities where the teaching of material culture is normally part of a broader ethnological programme involving a number of disciplines or is scattered over a number of departments. As the scientific study of our material past grows in Canada, one of the most urgent tasks is an orderly and rational organization of teaching and research in this field, with a forging of links not just between subdisciplines, but between the university and the museum. Institutional coherence should facilitate the development of a more integrated or holistic approach to the analysis of artifacts. The challenge and complexity of such an approach should not be underestimated.

In reality, the attributes which a material thing may possess are infinite. It would be safe to say that at no time has anyone done a complete descriptive study, let alone an analytical study, of a single material object. Such a study would be physically and psychologically impossible. We all utilize a series of preselected attributes, and the conclusions drawn from such a study are circumscribed by our philosophical framework . . .⁴

PROBLEMS OF DEFINITION

Despite an extensive empirical literature on the artifact, statements on definition are rare. Its nature is usually taken for granted, something about which little can be said. Even the prescriptive statements by leading European ethnologists failed until recently to tackle the problem. Over the past decade or more, however, a number of scholars have issued important statements on the nature and scope of material culture and have demonstrated its potential in humanistic scholarship.⁵

The classic division of culture into social, mental, and material components is, of course, arbitrary and artificial. Strictly speaking there is no such thing as material culture but rather the material manifestations of culture. These manifestations embrace all objects that are visible and concrete, a product of human workmanship, fashioned from natural substances by the hand of man. Their importance lies in the fact that they are expressions of the thought and behaviour of the craftsmen or culture that created and utilized them. Techniques of production are learned or transmitted socially and therefore are items of cultural behaviour, like language or religion. Any definition of the nature of material culture must move beyond the object itself to a consideration of the ideas, intentions, and perceptions of the people producing and using the object. In formulating an idealist classification, as opposed to a typology built

on morphology alone, one is reconstructing, in the words of Henry Glassie, the architecture of past thought. Material culture is imprinted thought, engraved behaviour, the final objectification of intrinsic hopes; its analysis is a search for understanding in the works of man.⁶

Scholars differ, if often only in an implicit way, in defining the scope or range of material culture. Folklorists, museum anthropologists, art or architectural historians, for example, usually restrict their examination of material culture to man-made objects such as traditional work tools, domestic utensils, and architecture. The cultural geographer, and to some extent the historical archaeologist, adopt a broader view, defining the subject as embracing all material manifestations of man's transformation of his natural physical world. Thus settlement patterns, fields, crops, cultivated grasses, hedgerows, domesticated plants and animals are considered artifacts.⁷ They represent man's modification and subjugation of his natural environment, animate as well as inanimate. The scope of material history, I would suggest, is nothing less than a consideration of the entire cultural landscape, the totality of material traits that cover like a carpet the bare bones of the natural landscape.

ECOLOGICAL AND SPATIAL DIMENSIONS

Because artifacts are fashioned from natural substances and reflect mental images they are direct expressions of relationships between culture and environment, between man and the land. Human technology has aided man since the dawn of civilization in extending his dominance over nature. Technology is the medium through which the natural is converted to the cultural. Man's transformation of the natural environment is a key process in the study of material history. The clearing of the Canadian forest, for example, and the ubiquity of wood as material in the production of artifacts during the pioneer period represent an important research theme in this field. Many of the pioneers who carved out farms from the dense woodlands of eastern Canada came from lands where such tasks had been accomplished centuries before. Coming from a background where timber was scarce and expensive, these immigrants would be expected to view the forest as a resource not to be wasted; but it stood between them and the farms they wanted to create. The attitudes and perceptions of the immigrants to the forest, the nature of their confrontation with it, and the gradual acquisition of indigenous woodlore and woodcrafts are largely unexplored topics in Canadian material history. It is possible that the confrontation between the settlers and the forest left a durable imprint on man as well as land.

Artifacts are dispersed over space and their distribution can be an important guide to human migrations and to the delineation of culture areas. Anthropologists pioneered the study of culture areas both in Europe and North America, and the diffusion of

material culture elements constituted an important segment of this early work. One of the objectives of these studies was to throw light on the controversy of single versus multiple origins of traits between the diffusionist and evolutionist schools. American cultural geography was profoundly influenced by early anthropology, and as anthropological interest in artifacts and diffusion waned these topics were embraced by cultural geographers. Unlike the anthropologist, who focused almost exclusively on pre-Columbian traits, the cultural geographer emphasizes the transfer, adaptation, and spread of European material culture in North America, particularly crops, settlement patterns, and folk architecture. There is now an extensive literature in America on these themes. Most studies focus on one or more ethnic groups occupying an area and select traits that are considered to be culturally diagnostic and therefore keys to the reconstruction of ethnic migrations and the formation of culture areas.⁸

Even the Americans are still decades behind the European ethnologist, however, in the production of detailed folk cultural atlases. The mapping of material traits has been a primary concern in European regional ethnology virtually since its inception. There is nothing in North America, for example, to match the detail of the *Atlas of Swiss Ethnography*, begun over forty years ago.⁹ A number of European ethnologists have pointed out that the visible, tangible remains of the past are especially suitable for mapping and are the best guide to the historic diffusion of cultures. Artifacts can last longer than the ideas or motivations of the people who produced or used them, and an object can spread beyond the territory of the culture group originally associated with it. To what extent, for example, did the wood-working traditions of the Loyalists travel beyond the areas actually occupied by them in southern Ontario and the Maritimes? Is French-Canadian material culture coterminous with the linguistic boundaries of French Canada? The complex historic patterns of diffusion of material traits and their relationship to items of non-material culture, like social status, religion, or dialect, represent another salient theme in the study of Canada's material traditions.

MATERIAL HISTORY AND HISTORY

Paradoxically, the profession apparently least interested in the scientific study of material history is history. Apart from the specialized subfields already alluded to, the general historian has, with rare exceptions, ignored the material past. Whenever the professional historian introduces the artifact, it is usually as an illustrative adjunct, not as an object for analysis. In its long history of annual meetings the American Historical Association has only once, to my knowledge, scheduled a session on material culture (in 1964). Prescriptive essays or addresses on the scope of history rarely even mention it.¹⁰ I know of no examples in Canada where material history is an established part of a university history department's offerings, although the subject is taught by art

historians, folklorists, cultural and historical geographers, archaeologists, and even anthropologists. Folklife scholars in Europe may have some training in history, and historical methods may form part of their teaching curriculum, but few are practising, professional historians. Both in Europe and North America most students with a basic training in history who end up working seriously on material culture usually come to it through the museum, where multidisciplinary programmes are offered. History graduates without this training who focus on material history are often considered antiquarians by their colleagues.

Part of the reason why most historians have rarely considered material culture is that until recently they have been concerned primarily with striking personages and events, the elite of history, not the folk. The material possessions of a political leader or group tell us far less about them than do their speeches, writings, and the documented records of their actions. Just as the anthropologist interested in the contemporary culture of a community will go directly to the people for his answers — ignoring their material traits as an indirect expression of that culture — so the historian focuses on the document for direct information on the elite. It is, of course, no longer true to say that the discipline of history is predominantly political and military in orientation or that all historians eschew the artifact. One can point to the schools of rural history in France or Britain, for example, to scholars such as Marc Bloch or W.G. Hoskins whose analyses of the origins and evolution of cultural landscape in their homelands are models in the field of material history.¹¹ More and more the historian is concentrating on ordinary people and the conditions of everyday life. In the past these people were largely non-literate or, if literate, rarely wrote. As Henry Glassie puts it, their statements were made in wood and stone, not in ink. Their thoughts and actions are inscribed on the face of the humanized landscape, like words on a page. The social historian should not ignore this other kind of document in his attempt to reconstruct and understand the past.

Students of material culture, in their enthusiasm, have sometimes argued that artifacts represent the only really reliable record of non-literate peoples. Written accounts of ordinary people in the past are rare and can be biased or erroneous. The artifact is considered to be much more widespread, is a direct expression of past culture, and is less prone to misinterpretation. In my view this greatly underestimates the importance of documentary sources in the study of material history. In both Europe and North America there are extensive archival data on traditional societies in the form of censuses, court records, church registers, business ledgers, and the like. Just as the social historian can gain insights through the analysis of artifacts, the student of material culture must examine all potentially relevant documentary sources because they can tell him more not only about the artifact but also about the broader social and economic context in which it was produced and used.

The concept of the artifact as ubiquitous, durable, and a comprehensive manifestation of past culture is misleading. Antiquarians in their romanticism extol the longevity of artifacts compared to the written word, but material culture is a highly perishable phenomenon and examples of longevity are all too rare. Entire traditional cultural landscapes can be obliterated or transformed by a new wave of immigrants, as in the case of Indian imprints with the advent of European settlers in North America, by economic forces, such as the impact of the Industrial Revolution on the medieval material culture of Britain, or by the urbanization of the countryside, as in contemporary Canada. The preservationists' fear of the bulldozer is a sharp reminder of how fragile the material past is. Even in areas remote from the modernizing influences of the past three centuries, the rate of survival of material traits is exceedingly low. The student of material culture should focus more on the dynamic nature of the artifact, its changeability and adaptability, its displacement and replacement, rather than its longevity.

The totality of material culture, even if it survived from a particular period in an area, is in no way a comprehensive record of that past. There is, first of all, a great amount of cultural behaviour that is not manifested materially, and that which is often reflects the behaviour of only a small minority in a community and perhaps for only a brief span of time. The dwelling house is one of the most suggestive and complex manifestations of past culture because everybody lived in one and it combined scores of individual elements and ideas in its composition. Yet even in folk societies the house was usually designed and built by specialized craftsmen, a tiny minority within any community. It expresses primarily the values and ideas of the craftsmen. This is not to deny the possibility that the builders of folk houses had to accommodate the wishes of their clients and that the potential occupants of a house played some formative role in designing it. If the house persisted intact for several generations, however, then all subsequent occupants played no formative role in the building process. Continuity or survival may be related to cultural inertia, inherited values, or to the economy, and of course warrants explanation, but any analysis of a folk house or any historic artifact must center primarily on the period of its creation and the symbiotic relationships between artisan and consumer. The nature of the dialogue between the craftsman and his client lies at the core of artifactual analysis.

While the artifact, like any document, has its limitations as a historical source, its basic complexity must not be underestimated. To begin to explain it, one must try to discover the sources of ideas of the artisan-producer. One must try to enter the craftsman's mind and rethink his thoughts, learn the manner in which he conceptualized his task, understand his rules of procedure, assess his design abilities, uncover his goals.¹² Even with a perfectly preserved artifact to examine, and with supporting documentation and oral tradition, the reconstruction

of the psychology of production is a daunting task.

The acceptability of the artifact is the test of the artisan's craftsmanship. People perceive it in different ways and at different levels. Its users may reflect primarily on its utilitarian qualities. Non-users, especially visitors or strangers, may move beyond the pragmatic and particularistic to a more conscious consideration of aesthetic attributes and see the artifact in its wider context or setting. Material objects are communicative devices, conveying messages at varying levels between producers, users, and observers. Some artifacts obviously contain far more expressive or symbolic power than others and are perceived as diagnostic of a particular ethnic group or culture area. The ultimate challenge of material history is to probe the deeper meanings contained in the objects man has produced. There is a considerable literature in existence relevant to this task. Anthropologists, rediscovering material culture, emphasize the cognitive and ideational properties of the artifact, and the literature, by cultural geographers and others, on environmental perception and man's symbolization of the landscape reveals the potential depth of material things as manifestations of culture.¹³

Material history will retain its multidisciplinary dimensions. It is a subject long established in a number of subfields. Interdisciplinary cooperation is vital, however, to its advancement, particularly at the conceptual level. The museum is the natural centre to lead the development of research in material culture in Canada because of its explicit commitment to the subject and because of its interdisciplinary organization. In so doing it should examine the European and the more recent American experience and should keep its lines open to universities where the subject is being taught. The surge of interest in local, regional, and ethnic history in Canada in recent years is reflected in a greater awareness of the material past. This past is rapidly being effaced. We have a clear responsibility to record and analyze it while it is still there.

NOTES

1. Marius Barbeau, "The Field of European Folk-Lore in America," *Journal of American Folklore* 32, no. 124 (1919): 185-97.
2. For a summary of the status of European regional ethnology or folklore research, see *Ethnologia Europaea* 1 (1967).
3. Ake Hulkrantz, "Some Remarks on Contemporary European Ethnological Thought," *Ethnologia Europaea* 1 (1967): 38-44; Ants Viires, "On the Methods of Studying the Material Culture of European Peoples," *Ethnologia Europaea* 9 (1977): 35-41.
4. James E. Fitting, "The Structure of Historical Archaeology and the Importance of Material Things," in *Historical Archaeology and the Importance of Material Things*, ed. Leland Ferguson, Society for Historical Archaeology, Special Publications Series no. 2 (1977), pp. 62-68. An example of a broader approach is contained in E. McLung Fleming, "Artifact Study: A Proposed Model," *Winterthur Portfolio* 9 (1974): 153-73.
5. Among the leading thinkers on philosophical and theoretical issues related to the study of material culture in North America is undoubtedly the folklorist Henry Glassie. See "Structure and Function: Folklore and the Artifact," *Semiotica* 7, (1973): 313-51; and particularly *Folk Housing in Middle Virginia: A Structural Analysis of Historic Artifacts* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee

- Press, 1975). This volume contains the best guide I know to relevant literature. Other relevant works include: James Deetz, "Material Culture and Archaeology — What's the Difference?" in Ferguson, ed., *Historical Archaeology*, pp. 9-12; C. de Rohan Czermak, "Structural Analysis in Material Culture," in *Man, Language and Society: Contributions to the Sociology of Language*, ed. Samir K. Ghosh (Paris and The Hague: Mouton, 1972), pp. 190-205; Christian Norberg-Schulz, *Intentions in Architecture* (Cambridge: Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press, 1968); Erwin Panofsky, *Meaning in the Visual Arts* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1955); Herbert A. Simon, *The Sciences of the Artificial* (Cambridge: Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press, 1969).
6. Miles Richardson, ed., *The Human Mirror: Material and Spatial Images of Man* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1974), p. 4.
 7. George Carter, "Domesticates as Artifacts," in Richardson, ed., *Human Mirror*, pp. 201-30; James Deetz, *In Small Things Forgotten: The Archaeology of Early American Life* (New York: Anchor Press/Doubleday, 1977) pp. 24-25; Fred Kniffen, "Material Culture in the Geographic Interpretation of the Landscape," in Richardson, ed., *Human Mirror*, pp. 252-67; Marvin Mikesell, "Tradition and Innovation in Cultural Geography," *Association of American Geographers Annals* 68, no. 1 (1978): 1-16; Milton B. Newton, Jr., "Settlement Patterns as Artifacts of Social Structure," in Richardson, ed., *Human Mirror*, pp. 339-61.
 8. The approach is best exemplified in the works of Kniffen and his students in Louisiana. See especially Fred Kniffen, "Folk Housing: Key to Diffusion," *Association of American Geographers Annals* 55, no. 4 (1965): 548-77. There are far too few studies of this ilk as yet in Canada, but a good example of the potential of this approach is Peter Ennals, "Nineteenth Century Barns in Southern Ontario," *Canadian Geographer* 16, no. 3 (1972): 256-70. A review of this literature and a bibliography is contained in John J. Mannion, *Irish Settlements in Eastern Canada: A Study of Cultural Transfer and Adaptation*, Department of Geography Research Publications no. 12 (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1974).
 9. Paul Geiger and Richard Weiss, eds., *Atlas der schweizerischen Volkskunde* (Basel: Schweizerische Gesellschaft für Volkskunde, 1950-). The importance of diffusion and culture area in ethnological research has been asserted by most leading scholars in this field. See Richard Weiss, "Cultural Boundaries and the Ethnographic Map," in *Readings in Cultural Geography*, eds. Philip L. Wagner and Marvin W. Mikesell (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962), pp. 62-74; Gunter Wiegmann, "The Atlas der deutschen Volkskunde and the Geographical Research Method," *Journal of the Folklore Institute* 5, no. 2/3 (1968): 187-97; Robert Wildhaber, "Folk Atlas Mapping," in *Folklore and Folklife*, ed. R. Dorson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1972), pp. 479-96. The recently launched North American Cultural Survey represents an important beginning in ethnographic mapping on this side of the Atlantic.
 10. An exception is William B. Hesseltine, "The Challenge of Artifact," in *The Present World of History* (Madison, Wis.: American Association for State and Local History, 1959). A criticism of Hesseltine's conventional view is offered in John Chavis, "The Artifact and the Study of History," *Curator* 7, no. 2 (1964): 156-62.
 11. Marc Bloch, *The Historian's Craft* (New York: Random House, 1953); H.P.R. Finberg and V.H.T. Skipp, *Local History: Objective and Pursuit* (Newton Abbott, Eng.: David & Charles, 1967). For an American view see Theodore C. Blegen, *Grass Roots History* (New York: Kennikat Press, 1947); John Demos, *A Little Commonwealth: Family Life in Plymouth Colony* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970).
 12. The literature on the idealist approach to history is central to the study of material culture. See R.G. Collingwood, "History as a Re-Enactment of Past Experience," in *The Idea of History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1956), pp. 282-383; G.R. Crowther, "Idealist History and Historical Geography," *Le Géographe canadien* 14 (1959): 31-36; Leonard Guelke, "An Idealist Alternative in Human Geography," *Association of American Geographers Annals* 64, no. 2 (1974): 193-202.
 13. David Lowenthal, ed., *Environmental Perception and Behavior* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1967); David Lowenthal and Hugh Prince, "The English Landscape," *Geographical Review* 54, no. 3 (1964): 309-46; William C. Sturtevant, "Does Anthropology Need Museums?," *Biological Society of Washington Proceedings* 89 (1969): 619-50; Yi Fu Tuan, "Geography, Phenomenology and the Study of Human Nature," *Canadian Geographer* 15, no. 3 (1971): 181-92; William Fenton, "The Advancement of Material Culture Studies in Modern Anthropological Research," in Richardson, ed., *Human Mirror*, pp. 15-36; Philip L. Wagner, "Cultural Landscapes and Regions: Aspects of Communication," *Geoscience and Man* 5 (1974): 133-42.