

Notes and Comments/Notes et commentaires

Material History and Museums: A Curatorial Perspective in Doctoral Research

In September 1983, I began an extended leave of absence from my position as Chief Curator of History at the New Brunswick Museum. My objective was to have an opportunity to explore a particular research problem, one that has haunted the work of history curators for some time now. The problem, transposed into a series of questions, can be stated as follows: How does one actually interpret the meaning of an artifact? What theoretical approaches, methodological procedures, and creative insights can be brought to bear on the artifact so that it will reveal its message? What is the precise nature of that message? In the quest for historical understanding, what is the relationship between the archival document — the traditional primary source material — and the artifactual document? As the repositories of our material heritage, are museums able to realize the full potential of their artifact collections in relation to their research programmes, publications, interpretation activities, and perhaps most importantly, in relation to their exhibitions? Is it possible to establish new and innovative terms of reference at the point where the disciplines of history and museum studies intersect, so as to substantially improve our museums' capacity to interpret Canada's rich material heritage?

It will be evident from the preceding questions that the research problem can be separated into two complementary components: the fact that further work is required on the process of analyzing and interpreting artifacts; and the fact that a comprehensive methodological approach to artifact study does not presently exist within the body of literature of museum studies.

In an attempt to address these questions bearing on the nature of curatorship and the role of curatorial research in today's museums, I enrolled in a doctoral programme in history at the University of New Brunswick. I commenced my studies with the endorsement of the New Brunswick Museum and the financial assistance of the National Museums of Canada, through a Museums Assistance Programmes Fellowship. My programme of studies has been carefully designed to allow detailed focus on the possibilities for expanding and refining the theoretical and practical potential of material history. Consequently, with particular reference to the Canadian museum community, I hope to develop, a solid conceptual framework; an adaptable research methodology; and practical inter-

pretative procedures for analyzing and understanding the meaning of historical objects, all within the broad parameters offered by the discipline of history.

The Problem Restated

To date, museum professionals have neither been the first, nor indeed, the most active group of specialists to confront the compelling research and interpretative issues posed by historical objects. In the past two decades, especially, scholars from a wide variety of academic disciplines have grappled with what the American historian William Hesselstine has termed "the challenge of the artifact." Substantial progress has been made by social scientists and a small number of historians in at least clarifying some of the theoretical aspects of the research problem. Yet for the most part, this work has been carried on in the United States and in western Europe. Canadians have been rather unimaginative in breaking new ground in this field, a lamentable situation which must not be allowed to continue.

To return to the work of museum professionals for a moment — it is most appropriate that they, as custodians of a vast data bank of material evidence, should assume the initiative and begin to make substantive contributions to scholarship in the field of material history. Curators are afforded special opportunities, particularly through the medium of the exhibition, but also in other kinds of museum programming, to unlock the inherent meaning of their collections. They have the opportunity to evolve a new generation of museum presentation; one that goes well beyond descriptive and often lifeless exhibition labels, well beyond static and predictable displays and programming. They have the opportunity to discover and then communicate the real meaning of their collections, and thus establish a central role for artifactual evidence within various historical and social scientific research paradigms. The contributions of university-based scholars will, no doubt, continue to break new ground, and in the process, enrich and enliven the growing body of knowledge generally known as material culture studies. It is very important, however, that museum scholars, those who are particularly sensitive to the complexion and the complexity of the three-dimensional document, rise to the occasion and meet "the challenge of the artifact."

The Possibilities

I have argued elsewhere that material history research has direct implications for expanding the body of knowledge in museum studies. Indeed, I believe the two fields are intimately related. Expanding and refining our understanding of the documentary value of artifacts is the best means of improving the quality and integrity of museum exhibitions. Moreover, there are other benefits that would follow from a more fully developed intellectual link between material history studies and museum studies. For instance, collections management procedures would necessarily be improved and become more sophisticated — a most worthy goal. Collections acquisitions policies would be framed in the light of material history research priorities. The documentation of collections would evolve from the level of elementary cataloguing (the case in most of our museums) to a more comprehensive, research-oriented system based on a widely accepted material history methodology for artifact analysis. It is an interesting comment on the relative lack of maturity of our profession to note that most history curators passionately adhere to what D.H. Fischer, in *Historians' Fallacies*, calls the "cult of flexibility" in their curatorial procedures. Many curators look with suspicion, even hostility, at any move toward methodological standardization in artifact research. Yet I am convinced that this is the direction in which we must move. Once a workable and acceptable material history methodology has been developed, its ultimate test will be the degree to which it is put into practice by history curators in museums across Canada, and elsewhere. The long-range goal, then, is to have curators operating within one versatile, comprehensive methodological framework; one that is consistently applied in museums throughout Canada; one that does not limit the scope of the curator, but rather extends the creative and scholarly foundation of curatorship. This goal is an essential step in the development of museum scholarship and therefore of the profession. The goal will be achieved at the point where material history method and museological practice coalesce.

The antithesis of this goal characterizes the present situation, where history curators share virtually nothing in common in terms of a generally accepted system for artifact analysis and interpretation. This unhappy fact would become abundantly clear if ten of the nation's history curators were invited to examine the same artifact — for example, a tall-case (grandfather) clock, ca. 1840. Assuming the piece has an adequate provenance, the curators would be asked to inspect the clock, to scrutinize its accession record, to conduct any additional research they deemed necessary, and then be prepared to discuss its meaning as an artifact and its significance as an historical document. I suspect their individual responses to this particular exercise would vary considerably and would be rather revealing. No doubt the comments would be interesting, even imaginative. Some of the responses might

even be similar in certain respects. The combined results of the ten responses would certainly provide a stimulating profile of the artifact in question. But when the curators were asked exactly how and why each analyzed the tall-case clock as they did, the idiosyncrasies, the individual biases, the contrasting perspectives, and the diversity of approaches would immediately become abundantly clear. While it would be a serious mistake to attempt to discourage creative individuality among curators, in the best sense of that phrase, it is time we faced up to the need for greater intellectual consistency within our ranks. How can specialists who do not adopt even the most basic methodological and procedural principles in reference to their research consider that they belong to the same profession?

Material History: A Definition

My "working" definition for this field of enquiry is as follows: material history refers to both the artifacts under investigation — material; and the disciplinary basis of the investigation — history. The word "material" refers to the broad range of historical objects which exist as concrete evidence of the human mind in operation at the time of construction and/or use. The word "history" refers to the scholarly preoccupation with the human past that is implicit in the practice of history. Moreover, it is understood that the practice of history can be informed and enriched by conceptual and methodological insights adapted from related disciplines.

In recent years a great many definitions have been put forward in an attempt to articulate the essence of artifact studies. Thomas J. Schlereth's *Material Culture Studies in America* (1982) is particularly helpful in this context, in that it exists as an anthology of readings in this field and reflects the current American thinking on what its author maintains is a new and promising field of historical investigation.

Nevertheless, I have decided to use the term "material history" rather than "Material Culture," a phrase which has clearly received acceptance south of the border. It should be noted that "material history" has been used by the National Museum of Man's History Division in its journal, the *Material History Bulletin*. The first, and to date, only national conference focusing on this field, again sponsored by the History Division of the National Museum of Man, held in Ottawa in 1979, was entitled: "Canada's Material History: A Forum." The term "material history" is preferable to "material culture" principally because of the ambiguity associated with the term "culture" in the English language. A review of social scientific literature confirms that there is little agreement among scholars as to the definition of "culture." There is a distinct advantage, therefore, to anchoring artifact studies to a clear disciplinary foundation, such as history. Despite the breadth of research interests and the diversity of

research procedures encompassed by the discipline of history, all professional historians, no matter how dissimilar their research topics may be, share a common intellectual tradition and a generally accepted approach to interpreting source materials, known as the historical method. It is obvious, on the other hand, that interdisciplinary studies are an essential aspect of modern historical scholarship. Conceptually, then, material history studies grow out of and are nourished by the discipline of history. In terms of method, the analysis and interpretation of three-dimensional evidence will be most fruitful when the insights of an interdisciplinary paradigm inform the study process.

Different Approaches to Material History Research

At this early stage in the development of material history research, it is instructive to note some of the ways in which artifacts may be used in historical scholarship. The history curator or university historian could attempt to examine a particular theme by making use of artifactual evidence with one or more of the following procedures.

1. A broad selection of diverse material evidence can be used to illuminate certain ideas or demonstrate certain aspects of a question. This approach lends itself most often to themes in socio-economic or socio-cultural history, and has particular relevance to studies of the family or community in the past.

2. A specific category of similar material evidence can be investigated in order to reach conclusions on historical questions that deal with developmental themes over time. For example, a selection of horse-drawn vehicles could be examined to reach a detailed understanding of the evolution of transportation technology in a given time and place; or a selection of women's hats could be studied to understand the social history of fashion trends in a given time and place. This type of artifact research can easily degenerate into a form of antiquarianism if the focus on carriages or hats becomes an end in itself, rather than a means to something greater. This, like all types of artifact research coming under the material history umbrella, must be conceived as an integral component of a larger research strategy, one designed to interpret and explain events, issues, personalities, and process in the past.

3. Archival sources such as probate records, personal correspondence, business records, architectural plans, craftsmen's sketches, photographs, and oral history can be employed to assist in reconstructing a particular material environment. This technique is especially valuable when the research interest is a physical setting that has not survived, but was influential in terms of larger historical questions.

4. Artifacts can be used to illustrate an idea or argument that has been developed primarily as a result of researching verbal sources. This is a rather limited use of

artifactual evidence. It is typically employed by historians to illustrate their publications, and even by history curators in exhibitions which exist as three-dimensional books. I have certainly made use of artifacts in this fashion, that is, simply to illustrate an historical concept that is based on traditional archival research. For example, in a maritime history exhibition, I displayed a large collection of late-nineteenth-century, hand-held wooden shipbuilding tools to confirm the fact that, decades after the impact of the Industrial Revolution had transformed the shipping technology of western Europe and America, the shipbuilders of Atlantic Canada were still involved in an essentially handicraft, pre-industrial enterprise. Although the use of artifacts as illustrative material may be valid in certain circumstances, care must be taken not to adopt this approach on all occasions. The artifactual evidence will not always be central to the historical question(s) being studied. Nevertheless, there is usually the potential for the investigator to establish a reciprocal research relationship between the traditional primary and secondary sources on the one hand and selected artifactual sources on the other. The total effect of this two-way relationship is, or should be, cumulative. The study of one kind of source material informs the study of the other, and vice versa, so the result is a far-reaching and refined appreciation of the particular theme(s) under consideration.

The four approaches to material history research noted above have been sketched in rough outline form only. The interplay among these and other procedures for artifact study deserves more detailed examination if the scholarly potential of material history is to be fully appreciated and acted upon. In the same way, the nature of non-verbal evidence poses serious limitations to the researcher trained to interpret only written and printed sources. These limitations must be thoroughly explored and clearly articulated so that material history is never mistakenly seen as the great panacea, whose impact on the discipline of history will transform the historiography of tomorrow. Only when we appreciate the far-reaching research implications of artifacts, including their strengths and limitations as a form of primary source material, can we consider material history techniques as a legitimate instrument of the larger enterprise of history.

A Programme of Study

As mentioned earlier, I am a doctoral candidate in the History Department of the University of New Brunswick. My choice of U.N.B. was not entirely a matter of convenience or coincidence. I decided to pursue studies at this university because of a progressive new graduate programme in material history that has been established by U.N.B.'s History Department. Although my own studies do not fall within the specific terms of reference of U.N.B.'s masters programme in material history, I am able to take advantage of the high-spirited scholarly

atmosphere generated by a small but committed community of professors and students. There is a recognition of the exciting potential of material history and an intense desire to pursue questions of theory and method at an advanced level. Moreover, the programme is enhanced by frequent visits to Fredericton by experts in the field of material history, for special lecture and seminar events.

U.N.B.'s graduate programme in material history is the first of its kind in Canada. It is a promising initiative. One of its greatest strengths is a fundamental recognition of the advantages of a scholarly partnership between the university and the regional museum community. Some of the students currently in the programme have extensive museum experience and I anticipate a growing number of publications being generated over the next few years as a result of seminar work and individual student research on various material history themes. It is within this setting, then, that I have been pursuing my studies in material history.

1. A matter of first priority has been the development of a comprehensive theoretical framework for artifact studies. I have come to realize that an intelligent research design should inform all serious attempts at artifact study. The research design should be anchored solidly to a conceptual foundation, one that is explicitly understood and expressed by the researcher.

There is a substantial body of secondary literature on aspects of man's physical environment. This work has been conducted by scholars in a variety of disciplines, both in North America and in Europe, and some of it has important implications for material history studies. Those disciplines or fields of enquiry of major interest to material history are historical archaeology, art and architectural history, and American material culture studies. In addition, published work in other areas must also be consulted and evaluated in light of the clear advantages of interdisciplinary borrowing. Often it is the obscure links, those relationships that are not always obvious at first glance, that can be critical in the development of new fields of study. Occasionally such fields begin to crystallize precisely at the point where two or more previously unrelated disciplines meet. Of particular relevance in the context of an evolving theoretical framework for material history are studies in socio-economic and cultural history, historical and cultural geography, folk-life studies, technological history, cultural anthropology, social psychology, the psychology of perception, aesthetics, phenomenology, and decorative arts studies.

2. Having established an acceptable theoretical context for material history, I hope to proceed to the point where a comprehensive methodology can be formulated for the analysis and interpretation of artifacts. At this preliminary stage I feel the methodology will probably benefit from a blend of existing procedures practiced by historical

archaeologists and art historians. For instance, I am impressed by the writings of archaeologists James Deetz and Stanley South and art historians Jules David Prown and George Kubler. Rather than attempt to reinvent the wheel, I expect to be able to selectively adapt, and where necessary, readjust conceptual procedures and specific techniques to meet the requirements of a model for artifact study, one that is appropriate for curators and historians.

3. The methodology or model for artifact study must next be tested and subsequently refined. At this stage of the study a specific group of artifacts will be subjected to detailed analysis. I plan to focus attention on ecclesiastical architecture and furnishings as a category of material evidence. I will work with a sample of church artifacts, (including structures), from existing examples in the Maritime provinces. The time-frame for the study will be the late eighteenth and the early nineteenth centuries. It will be necessary to limit the sample to only one or two denominational traditions. It should be emphasized that I am not setting out to conduct an exhaustive investigation into church history. Rather I will make use of a select group of artifacts in an effort to formulate and then refine a material history methodology. The methodology, as a valuable research tool, will be used together with other more traditional historical research procedures to develop an interpretation of particular social and cultural themes in the light of existing Canadian historiography. Underlying all of this is a fundamental objective — the desire to relate this work to the practical exigencies of artifact interpretation in the world of Canadian museology.

I believe there are a number of advantages in selecting ecclesiastical artifacts:

— I wanted a category of objects not already catalogued by a particular museum. Regrettably, existing cataloguing procedures in many museums limit the potential of museum collections for material history analysis.

— I hope to emphasize, through this study, that museum curators must be able and willing to focus at least some of their attention on artifacts outside the four walls of their museums. The history curator must become conscious of the material history environment in its broadest sense if he/she is to place his/her collections in their proper perspective and at the same time be on the "cutting edge" of material history scholarship. Whether or not these artifacts are considered potential acquisitions is not really the point.

— With a few notable exceptions, such as the work of David Goa, Curator of Ethno-Cultural Heritage at the Provincial Museum of Alberta, many museums, particularly those in English Canada, have been uninterested in documenting church history. This bias against religious artifacts can inhibit the museums' capacity to portray accurately themes related to social and cultural history.

Religious belief was a dominant factor in energizing the thought and the activities of previous generations. This historical truth should be expressed in and through museum collections. Perhaps by concentrating on ecclesiastical artifacts, my study will, in some small way, help to increase museological interest in the religious heritage of Canada.

— I wanted to work with a category of objects that included items with enough individual variety to really test the methodology. Ecclesiastical artifacts are characterized by a strong unifying theme, yet are quite diverse in terms of form and function.

The Merits of a Research Model

The advantages of a material history methodology or research model should be obvious. In the first place, a comprehensive, systematic means of approaching the artifact will assist curators and historians in coming to terms with the nature of verbal and non-verbal evidence. Innovative avenues for interplay between archival and artifactual sources will be suggested. Such an approach to the artifact will inform particular kinds of historical problems by serving to confirm, refine, modify, or even contradict, an existing interpretation. The use of a material history methodology will encourage a higher level of intellectual discipline within artifact studies by helping the researcher distinguish between deductive (reading things into objects) and inductive (reading things out of objects) reasoning. Without a logical plan designed to encourage the researcher to understand the artifact in a comprehensive sense, it becomes very easy to confuse deductive and inductive reasoning in reference to artifact analysis. A research model will allow for a consistent, predictable, step-by-step approach to the artifact. If the research is to be verifiable, it must be repeatable. The original research process should not be "hidden," rather it should be clearly understood by anyone who may wish to pursue a similar line of enquiry in an effort to evaluate the findings of the initial study. This arrangement would help

to overcome the present situation in many museums where the tendency in curatorial research is toward total flexibility, procedurally speaking, and insufficient accountability, intellectually and professionally. The use of a model seems to be the only consistent means of addressing the various characteristics of the artifact. The object's material, construction, provenance, style, function, authenticity, and value or significance, deserve detailed and sensitive consideration. This can be realized through a methodical approach to artifact analysis.

As my study continues I will be expanding on all of these ideas. I would be grateful for comments and suggestions from the readers of the *Material History Bulletin*. There are a great many questions to be resolved in the months ahead. Fortunately there is a growing number of people — students, curators and academic specialists — who are turning their energies to confront "the challenge of the artifact." I look forward to sharing ideas with many of these people.

Somebody once asked Thomas Edison about his rules of procedure and received a rude reply: "Rules!" said Edison, "Hell! There ain't no rules around here! We're tryin' to accomplish sump'n."¹ I for one, and I suspect many of my curatorial colleagues, perhaps unknowingly, have been adopting Edison's philosophy in relation to our curatorial research. With all due respect to Edison's view, there may be a better way to proceed. The remarkable didactic potential of the collections we curate, the scholarly responsibility we have to our museums and the leadership we owe to our profession all suggest that it is high time we give serious consideration to a more sophisticated method of curatorial research.

NOTE

1. Quoted by David Hackett Fischer, *Historians' Fallacies: Toward a Logic of Historical Thought* (New York: Harper and Row, 1970), p. xviii.

Gregg Finley

Reflections of an Image Finder: Some Problems and Suggestions for Picture Researchers

This note offers general observations on picture and photograph collections in certain Canadian archives and libraries, along with a few thoughts on the subject of indexing historical photographs and other illustrations. It has resulted from a number of sporadic field trips over a two-year period to provincial archives and other major repositories of photographs, prints, and drawings¹ in order to find historical illustrations of domestic life in Canada, ca. 1840-1920. Forming a research collection,

these are intended to support curatorial, interpretive, and restoration needs at National Historic Sites and to serve other scholarly purposes. Most of this collection consists of historical photographs, the vast majority taken after 1870, of Canadian homes and home life.² (It includes such ancillary views as the interiors of commercial establishments containing domestic goods.) So far the collection amounts to about 5,000 reproductions — prints, photocopies, a few slides, and two reels of microfilm.