

Notes and Comments/Notes et commentaires

North American Material Culture Research: New Objectives, New Theories

Report on a Conference Sponsored by the Institute of Social and Economic Research, Memorial University of Newfoundland, and Winterthur Museum, 19-21 June 1986, St. John's, Newfoundland.

A multidisciplinary cluster of scholars from museums, universities and historic sites gathered in St. John's in June to probe the intellectual power of the artifact. Significantly, this was an international forum, jointly sponsored by Memorial University and the Henry Francis duPont Winterthur Museum, in Delaware. Not since the National Museum of Man's 1979 Ottawa conference, Canada's Material History, has this country seen a major gathering of material culture devotees. This event was long overdue. That the gathering occurred when and where it did is a credit to the conference organizer, Gerald L. Pocius. An Associate Professor of Folklore at Memorial University and a 1985 Winterthur Research Fellow, Pocius succeeded in convincing Winterthur officials that the conference should have a North American, as opposed to a United States, orientation. Accordingly the meeting was organized for Canada's easternmost province. Not surprisingly, Newfoundland hospitality, geography, climate and culture proved to be a compelling backdrop to the main event.

The conference was billed as something of a landmark within the rapidly evolving material culture scene. It provided a rare opportunity to bring together leading artifact studies specialists from Canada and the United States to explore new objectives and new theories on the role of artifacts in humanistic scholarship. Conference sessions included a complementary blend of American and Canadian speakers addressing a broad range of conceptual and methodological issues. The conference proceedings will be published by the Institute of Social and Economic Research at Memorial University.

Comparisons with the 1979 Material History conference in Ottawa are inevitable and perhaps profitable. In my opinion the main difference between the two events relates to the increased rigour and refinement which now characterize this field. Important recent developments (due in no small part to the formative influence of the growing number of graduate programmes in material culture, material history, public history and museology), include a more precise and comprehensive view of the scope and mission of artifact studies. Research in both the

museum and the academy is being enriched by this growing appreciation of the properties of the artifact and their scholarly potential. Judging by the extent of their participation in St. John's, historians may at last be prepared to join with colleagues from the various other artifact-related disciplines, such as archaeology, geography, art history and folklore, and make an essential contribution to the debate on the intellectual significance of non-verbal sources.

Of the approximately 150 delegates who made their way to Newfoundland, about 40 per cent were from the United States. Although a list of conference delegates was not available at the time of the event, an informal profile of those in attendance reveals something of the heterogeneity of the current material culture movement. A large number of disciplines were represented within the museum and academic constituencies. The conference programme confirmed this, with papers presented by museologists, historians, art historians, folklorists, anthropologists and a sociologist.

In a provocative introductory paper, Gerald Pocius underlined the lack of unity among practitioners of material culture. It has become fashionable in some circles to emphasize the similarities rather than the differences which typify current work in the field. Pointing to the recent publication of at least four American material culture anthologies, Pocius noted that these works have tended to misrepresent the nature of artifact studies by obscuring dissimilarities in research methods and goals. Yet in the midst of this multidisciplinary maze there are, nonetheless, encouraging signs of innovation and maturity. Pocius was the first of several conference speakers to point to the formative role being played by museum scholars in the advancement of material culture studies. Acknowledging that the American scene is dominated by American Studies specialists working primarily in universities, Pocius suggested that a central feature of artifact studies in Canada is the experimental ideas being conceived and developed by curators, museologists and museum historians.

A convincing example of this tendency was the paper on Québec's nineteenth-century textile industry jointly presented by Adrienne Hood and Thierry Ruddel. Hood, a curatorial fellow at the Royal Ontario Museum, and Ruddel, a historian with the History Division of the

Canadian Museum of Civilization, had combined their respective areas of expertise to collaborate on a research project of considerable importance both methodologically and historiographically. In a cleverly integrated presentation involving two projectors and two scripts, Hood and Ruddel demonstrated how artifact and archival sources can complement each other to enhance the larger study. Here was an instance of a socio-cultural research endeavour formulated within a museum context which addressed key questions in the history of French Canada, such as the process of modernization, the role of farming families in responding to market forces and the influence of colonialism on local textile production and consumption. Ruddel concluded with a call for more sophisticated, museologically relevant artifact studies and for more teamwork and institutional cooperation among museum scholars.

Regrettably, not all the papers were this original or significant. Overall, the presentations were of uneven quality. Personal preferences no doubt vary in a conference where so many disciplines are represented. I was particularly impressed by those papers whose chief aim was the advancement of material culture research techniques as part of the larger scholarly enterprise. In this category the presentation by Hood and Ruddel noted above and those of art historian Jules Prown and architectural historian Dell Upton were especially noteworthy. But there were also some less substantive offerings, presentations that covered old ground, that did little to penetrate to the core on questions of theory or method. Further, some papers were jammed with jargon. Some speakers showed a particular penchant for enlivening their prose with a host of terms designed to put their listeners to sleep; gems such as, "aestheticism," "artness," "decontextualized," and by far the favourite piece of material culture patter, "reification."

With the exception of some slide presentations, the absence of any real artifacts for group inspection and discussion gave the conference a certain abstract, at times even metaphysical, posture. The lack of real objects with which to animate and substantiate the discussion of a particular paper points to the paradox of many material culture conferences. Typically, a material culture meeting is organized to focus on the scholarly significance of objects, each speaker acknowledges the importance of direct physical interaction with the objects as an investigative axiom, yet for various practical and logistical reasons, the event is singularly devoid of the objects under discussion. This is a problem that must be sorted out if gatherings of artifact studies specialists are ever to maximize their potential for scholarly exchange. Other sources of frustration for more than a few of the delegates in St. John's related to the lack of time for questions and reactions in all but the concluding session and a habit on the part of the majority of the session commentators to be

uncritical and overly generous in their assessments of each paper.

A number of themes were emphasized during the course of the conference. Of particular note were the papers that argued for the re-emergence of art history within the artifact researcher's toolbox. In particular, Jules Prown, Dell Upton, Ken Ames, Robert Trent and Henry Glassie spoke in favour of the need to reappraise the often criticized methods of the art historian, to rediscover their significance for material culture studies.

In the final session entitled, "Where Do We Go from Here," Henry Glassie, an American folklorist and one of the formative writers in the field, was given the task of pulling all the pieces together in a summation of the conference. Noting at the outset that his grandmother thought he should be a preacher, Glassie proceeded to captivate and inspire his audience with a brilliant synthesis of the principal ideas generated by the meeting. Repeating the phrase three times for effect, Glassie exhorted his listeners to "go back to the field!" What is needed, according to Glassie, is not more new theories but more fieldwork that tests the old theories. He reminded his listeners that theory goes out of date with the passing of time, but sensitive and systematic description of artifactual sources is a timeless source of cultural data. Briefly recounting some of the developmental chapters in the recent history of the material culture movement, Glassie observed that the tone and direction of this conference was of fundamental importance for the future, for it represented the convergence of history and anthropology upon art. Glassie then called for the birth of a "new" history, a different way of understanding the past constructed in large measure around a more imaginative and at the same time more systematic use of archival and field sources.

The lasting significance of the North American Material Culture Research Conference was that it succeeded in bringing together a sizable number of Canadian and American material culture scholars to jointly consider the artifact studies agenda for the next decade. Yet despite the articulate and forceful statements by Glassie about a "new" history and despite the abundant evidence of interdisciplinary goodwill and cooperation, fundamental questions still remain. For example, precisely how should researchers come to terms with the scholarly potential of the artifact? Can artifact sources actually break new ground in the quest for a more profound understanding of the past? Will the properties of the artifact reveal additional layers of knowledge about social and cultural history? Is a new material culture discipline desirable or should investigators seek to adapt and stretch existing disciplinary frameworks? Are there real differences in the ways Americans and Canadians approach artifact studies? What is the museum community's role in

the advancement of material culture? Do museums possess the resolve and the resources to undertake sophisticated research projects? What research methods, models and techniques are most effective in artifact analysis? Are scholars paying enough attention to systematic, verifiable fieldwork?

The jury is still out on these and other questions which pertain to the long-term impact of material culture studies on humanistic scholarship. Henry Glassie was, of course, correct in his final exhortation to conference

delegates. The next decade must bring forth more fieldwork and additional case studies. Moreover, to have any cumulative effect, this work must be published both in books and exhibitions. This constitutes the material culture studies agenda. Its broad outlines are already well established. It is a strategy that will blossom in the next few years and lead to substantive conclusions about the intellectual power of the artifact.

Gregg Finley

Atlantic Canada Newspaper Survey

Readers of *Material History Bulletin* will find the Atlantic Canada Newspaper Survey of interest. The objective of the survey is the creation of a database of information contained in advertisements for goods and services appearing in selected newspapers of Atlantic Canada before 1900. Fields exist for ten commodity classifications based upon Statistics Canada's "Trade of Canada Classification." Additional fields identify the source and date of the advertisement, the advertiser, place of business, details of vessel for imports, and related information plus cataloguers' remarks. The database is useful for the documentation of museum objects, but in addition it can support a wide range of studies in regional urban, economic and material history.

The Canadian Museum of Civilization has sponsored the survey since 1982, working in collaboration with the Canadian Heritage Information Network, and at various times the Newfoundland Museum, the New Brunswick Museum, the Nova Scotia Museum, the Prince Edward Island Museum and Heritage Foundation, plus the Gorsebrook Institute of St. Mary's University and the University of New Brunswick. Using resources obtained through the federal government's summer employment schemes for students, survey organizers fielded nine to eighteen researchers each summer. The result after more than five years of work is the completion of approximately 30,000 documents, of which one half has been entered onto the mainframe computer of the Canadian Heritage Information Network (CHIN). The newspaper survey has been the subject of two articles in *Material History Bulletin* – number 10 (spring, 1980) and number 20 (fall, 1984). A Guide for Users has also just been prepared.

Several initiatives have been taken this year to broaden the survey's financial base and to make it more accessible

to the university community. The chief development was the award of Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council grants to the University of New Brunswick and to the P.E.I. Museum and Heritage Foundation for 1986-1987 as part of its Research Tools Program. Information on these two projects may be obtained from the Material History Co-ordinator, Division of Humanities and Languages, University of New Brunswick, P.O. Box 5050, Saint John, N.B. E2L 4L5, and Curator of Collections, P.E.I. Museum and Heritage Foundation, 2 Kent Street, Charlottetown, P.E.I. C1A 1M6.

Access to the database may be made in several ways. Direct on-line service is available through the 140 participating institutions of CHIN or via datapack for those having a datapack identification number. Users in the Ottawa local call area may access CHIN without using a datapack. There is no charge for use of the database except the communications cost which the user must bear. CHIN will also transfer a portion of the database to a floppy disk or the complete database to another mainframe at the user's expense. Enquiries regarding access to the Atlantic Canada Newspaper Survey database should be directed to ACNS Project Officer, Canadian Heritage Information Network, National Museums of Canada, Ottawa, Ontario K1A 0M8 (613-992-3333).

Survey of a representative group of newspapers for all of Atlantic Canada for the period to 1900 is an ambitious undertaking. Work has progressed at different rates in each of the four provinces. Enough has now been done, however, to make the survey an important reference and research tool. Information on it may be obtained by contacting the Atlantic Provinces Historian, History Division, Canadian Museum of Civilization, Ottawa, Ontario K1A 0M8 (819-994-6049).