

Comptes rendus

Thomas J. Schlereth,
Cultural History and Material Culture:
Everyday Life, Landscapes, Museums

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Schlereth, Thomas J. *Cultural History and Material Culture: Everyday Life, Landscapes, Museums*. Ann Arbor, Michigan: UMI Research Press, 1990. xxiv, 440 pp., 163 illus. Cloth US\$45, ISBN 0-8357-1899-9.

In his famous inquiry into the implications of democracy for American development, the French sociologist Alexis de Tocqueville expressed grave concern that "amongst democratic nations ... life is generally spent in eagerly coveting small objects which are within reach." De Tocqueville feared that this preoccupation with "the pursuit of comfort" and physical enjoyment would enervate the souls of democratic citizens and distract them from more strenuous, loftier goals. "A man cannot enlarge his mind as he would his house," he noted. Small satisfactions, vulgar pleasures threatened to lull democratic communities into mediocrity, to confine their ambitions to easily attainable, petty desires, so that over time they could "lose sight of those more precocious possessions which constitute the glory and the greatness of mankind" (Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, ed. John Stuart Mill (reprint, New York: Schocken Book, 1961) 2: 156-8, 292).

De Tocqueville's apprehensions are not shared by Thomas J. Schlereth. In his latest publication on material culture studies in North America, *Cultural History and Material Culture*, Schlereth's message once again is celebratory. Readers familiar with this scholar's previous work are well aware that over the past decade he has carved out a unique position within the material culture field. He

is our chronicler, our bibliographer, probably our foremost advocate. At the same time, he is also our pied piper, a tunesmith whose siren song invites our diverse collection of researchers, curators, souvenir hunters, and museum managers to join hands with his and dance together into an unspecified future. This new work exemplifies Schlereth's dual role. It is both scholarly reference and siren song. An evaluation of its importance must address both aspects.

The work divides into two parts. The largest portion is a series of ten research essays which use artifactual evidence to explore themes in American social history. Most are set in the nineteenth century, often in Chicago or the American midwest. They range in subject matter from mail order catalogues to world's fairs, from urban artisans to children in photographs, from rural landscapes to city pavements. Each essay is gracefully written and unfailingly accompanied by a connoisseur's collection of apt photographs, amusing anecdotes, and bibliographical references.

Yet for all their undeniable technical virtuosity, these descriptions of encounters between the American people and their material possessions lack urgency or bite. They seem peripheral, devoid of both conflict and enduring significance. This arises from Schlereth's lack of interest in the negative potential, the messy underside of his topics. For example, did the Chicago World's Fair mark the moment when Americans shifted their allegiance from a transcendent Christian deity to an earthly, man-made electric generator? Henry Adams, an acute eyewitness, thought so, but Schlereth's celebratory

description of the fairs takes no note of this criticism. Or, how innocent are children's photographs? Do they merely define childhood more precisely, as Schlereth suggests, or do they document the development of more manipulative, more intrusive adult controls, as feminists have argued? Even the chapter on mail-order catalogues, for me the best read in the entire book, is one-sided. Schlereth captures the exuberance, the insouciant commercialism of this new market device wonderfully well. But the unfortunate side effects of the catalogues, their assault on rural culture and the imposition of middle class, urban values, are missing. Above all, what about Chicago, the city whose very name has come to symbolize American social tensions? Schlereth gives us the boosters, the planners and the architects, but no race riots mar his text, no machine politics, not even a Jane Addams much less an Al Capone.

In short, although Schlereth occasionally refers to such notions as hegemony or patriarchy, his basic enthusiasm imparts a sunny, squeaky clean, fourth of July feeling to his text. Some will find this wholly delightful, but serious students must question its validity and its potential influence on material culture research. Are our explorations of objects and our exhibits limited to the sunny side of life? And if so, how far have material culture studies really come from the sentimental, pious banalities of the nineteenth century? Schlereth's evidence is not encouraging despite all the academic paraphernalia. And yet in the very same season when this book was published, a television documentary series on the American Civil War (Ken Burns, *The Civil War* (New York: Florentine Films, 1990)) was able to use precisely the same evidence – objects, photographs, and landscapes – to probe the most fundamental struggles of our species. War versus peace, love versus hate, brutality versus tenderness were depicted with both historical accuracy and stunning sensitivity. Why is it that so much material culture work avoids the big questions, the ravaging experiences, the leap into the dark recesses of the human condition? The problem is clearly not one of insufficient evidence.

The other, more theoretical portion of this book is equally troubling. It deals with current approaches to both the interpretation of objects and their exhibition within museum

settings. Despite the greater density of the subject matter, the same aura of optimism and innocence prevails. We get personal vignettes on the author. He is a farm boy, an intellectual historian, a gardener, a professor, an admirer of fine craftsmanship. His job is simply that of a recorder, a faithful observer, a fair-minded patron of material research. Yet beneath this geniality and openness, the undeniable charm and generosity of Schlereth's approach, there lies a specific philosophic assumption and a very purposeful social agenda. Like the nineteenth-century entrepreneurs and curators whom he admires so much, Schlereth is a positivist. He genuinely believes that all human experience can be subjected to laboratory analysis, to the so-called scientific method. It follows logically from this assumption that what material cultural studies and museums most urgently need is, quite simply, more. More data, more measurements, more research, more reviews, more inventories of objects, photographs, scrapbooks, and landscapes, more conferences to pool our finds, more slides to document them, more associations and more museums to extend their power.

There is no doubt in Schlereth's mind that out of this vast, ever increasing assemblage of objects and data, truth will emerge. A simple, spontaneous "inquiry approach" to objects will produce enlightenment. The contribution of "ordinary people" to history will become apparent. Progress will ensue. People will write their own histories. The faith of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Auguste Comte, and John Dewey will be vindicated.

This philosophic outlook, this faith, is widely shared within our field. It emphasizes quantity over quality, process over results, doing over thinking, and method over theory. And it poses two fundamental challenges: one concerns the allocation of scarce resources; the other involves the very nature of democracy.

To put the first issue bluntly, can museums afford Schlereth's *omnium gatherum* approach to material culture? Competition for cultural funding is already severe in Canada and increasingly so in the United States. Museums must continually demonstrate their value as keepers of indispensable collections, teachers of important truths, sites of culturally meaningful expression and fulfillment. And their curators, God bless

'em, must be one part entertainer, one part researcher, one part teacher, and one part brilliant administrator! This is the real challenge facing museums today. I was disappointed that Schlereth had nothing to say about the training of curators. And I found his clinging to the image of the museum as a community attic seriously out of date. Surely museums must pursue a very different strategy if they are to survive – consisting of well defined goals, carefully selected collections, and profound respect for the intelligence of museum goers, especially their willingness to confront hard truths and their need to probe the complex meaning of the world they have created.

What is that world created by our democratic societies? Small objects? Petty pleasures? A preoccupation with physical ease? De Tocqueville's forebodings about the capacity of creature comforts to enervate our souls seem even more salient today. Yet surely that is not the whole story. The world is full of strenuous challenges and many of them, ironically enough, involve objects. The generation of electric power, once such an unquestioned boon, is now a more complicated part of our lives. The coming of mass industrial society, with its densely packed cities and standardized habits of dress and behavior, has raised new questions about sexual identity and reduced the number of safe outlets for our aggressive impulses. The penetration of less industrialized societies

with our goods and our gospel of consumption has provoked both emulation and exploitation.

One could go on about the poisoning of the natural world, the destruction of the landscape, etc. My point is, and I think Tom Schlereth would agree, that museums and material cultural studies are ideal sites from which to contemplate the impact of objects upon humanity. Such projects are not without risk, as the recent uproars over the "Into the Heart of Africa" exhibit at the Royal Ontario Museum and the Robert Maplethorpe photography exhibit in the United States chillingly attest. Perhaps what we need is not more data, but more courage: a firm sense of the importance of our cultural mission and a willingness to contest the role objects play in what de Tocqueville calls "the greatness and the glory of mankind."

Schlereth's new book is a superb place to begin the dialogue which we must all undertake in order to meet this challenge. Although I and perhaps others may disagree with individual points, we must all be grateful for the range of his subject matter, the depth of his research, and the profundity of his commitment. I urge everyone to read it. They will find new insights in every chapter, interesting comparisons of Canadian and American practice, and a truly midwestern cornucopia of strategies to explore the meaning of the object.

Catherine C. Cole, ed.,
Norwegian Immigrant Clothing and Textiles
DOROTHY K. BURNHAM

Cole, Catherine C., ed. *Norwegian Immigrant Clothing and Textiles*. Occasional Paper no. 1. Edmonton: Prairie Costume Society 1990. 113 pp., 58 illus. Paper \$13.00, ISBN 0-9694539-0-6.

In May 1987 at the Beaver House Gallery in Edmonton an interesting gathering took place. Canadian and American researchers came together with a Norwegian costume expert to discuss what information exists concerning the clothing worn in North America by Norwegian immigrants and to

what extent the textile making skills of the homeland were utilized as adjustment was made to a pioneering life. It is not easy to gather the necessary funds for a publication and to expend the energy necessary to turn the passing excitement of a one day seminar into a permanent contribution but, with this small book, that has been accomplished. Congratulations to the Prairie Costume Society and Catherine C. Cole, editor, and to all others who have worked on the project.

The publication is well designed, the cover is attractive, the format excellent but the type is rather too small for comfort. The