# Book Reviews

# Comptes rendu de livres

**TIM COOK**

Review of
Hannan, Leonie and Sarah Longair. 2017. *History Through Material Culture*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.

Pp. 176, 10 colour illustrations, 35 black & white illustrations. ISBN: 9781784991265, (paperback), $19.95.

"As long as humans have made material things, material things have shaped human history." And so opens a new student's guide for the study of material culture from Leonie Hannan, a Research Fellow at Queen's University, Belfast, and Sarah Longair, a lecturer in History at the University of Lincoln. *History Through Material Culture* is part of a new series of short books, known as IHR Research Guides, that are published through the Institute of Historical Research at the School of Advanced Study, University of London. They aim to provide a practical introduction to sub-disciplines of history, and combine theoretical discussions with case studies that are grounded in historical problems.

How historians interact with, study, and interrogate material culture to better understand societies—with their encoded values, power relations, and cultural affiliations—lies at the heart of this useful book. Hannan and Longair's introduction offers valuable insight into the study of material culture and the many theorists who have struggled to frame the field that has evolved rapidly since the 1970s, with increasing scholarly sophistication.

Throughout the guide, the authors engage in cross-disciplinary study that draws on history, anthropology, archaeology, art history, and other fields to better understand the one-time mundane objects of the past that are often today's treasures. Scholars in the field of material culture, especially those in museums, know that most artifacts cannot speak for themselves and must be interpreted to tease out their stories. But how to carry out that work in a systematic manner, to pose the right questions, and to know how to address them are just some of the issues raised in this book through a series of step-by-step chapters.

After a superb historiographical chapter that draws out key studies and approaches to material culture research, Hannan and Longair provide a number of teachable case studies that highlight more abstract ideas, such as how to interpret the porcelain cup depicted in Andrea Mantegna's Adoration of the Magi or how a student might uncover colonial encounters as reflected in ornate and decorated palace doors of the Ogoga of Ikere from East Africa that now rest in the British Museum.

The study of material culture allows researchers to engage in what the authors describe as a "cultural biography of things" (24). Objects and things are at the centre of the discussion and debate. There is also a well-developed section on "absent" artifacts, and how researchers might think about the value of objects which no longer exist, but which are described in texts or captured in visual culture.

The authors argue for broadening the study of material culture, with a suggestion that researchers may wish to "attend also to the spaces occupied by material things" (10), such as rooms, buildings, and landscapes. They also suggest the inclusion of intangible heritage, the "living culture that resides in communities, practices and traditions (such as dance and music and ways of remembering collective pasts)" (10). Material culture can be especially useful in

illuminating the history from below, for those in the past who did not leave written records or were marginalized by society or education. The fields of social, cultural, and gender history all can be enhanced with historians widening their gaze to include objects.

Hannan and Longair offer some guidance in determining the "value" of objects, from financial to emotional, and how the "biography" of an object can be revealed with research, but more space could be devoted in the book to what happens to objects and artifacts as they move from generation to generation, with succeeding narratives infusing objects with new meaning. A different set of narratives is ascribed to objects when they enter the museum or other environments to become parts of permanent collections.

While the book's "how-to" directions can be a little clunky at times, I recommend this slim guide for undergraduate and graduate students, and it would be a helpful primer for museum specialists grappling with the many meanings of their artifact collections. Unfortunately, while much is covered in the book, the authors do not speculate as to where material culture studies are going. Despite being published in 2017, there is almost no discussion of technology like 3D printing. This technology represents a potential for disruption in the field if objects can simply be printed and act as replicas of the original. How does this problematize the value of objects? The authors might have drawn on archivists and museum professionals for some guidance. To take one example from that field, should an original analogue video format be preserved or the remastered, digital version? Some of these cross-disciplinary questions from the world of cultural conservation might have helped elucidate some of the questions that are emerging around 3D printing. Moreover, the opportunity for engaging in digital scanning, whereby objects can be visually manipulated and viewed from any angle in digital platforms is changing how researchers can access material culture objects from museum's holdings.

Despite these omissions, Hannan and Longair offer much insight into the complex lives and afterlives of objects, and they deliver focused ways for how student historians might augment or even supplant the textual record with that of the object, and how such a study can help them better understand aspects of the past.

**MARTIN HUBLEY**

Review of
Van Horn, Jennifer. 2017. *The Power of Objects in Eighteenth-Century British America*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.

Pp. 456, 11 colour plates, 130 B&W illustrations, notes and index. ISBN 978-1-4696-2956-8, $49.95.

*The Power of Objects* posits that assemblages of objects were a means by which regional and then national identities developed in the major ports of British America, particularly before and after the American Revolution. The consumption and production of material culture by elites, including the upwardly-mobile middling sort such as merchants, planters, politicians, and others with imperial interests, were central to this evolution. Objects were used to build status, create networks, and establish social position. These included artworks ranging from engravings and prints to formal portraits and sculpture; furniture; ceramics, and more unusual "material things" such as artificial limbs and live-tooth transplants.

The book examines themes such as how shared imagery among artwork by the same artist found in different ports or regions projected and built not only mercantile connections, but concepts such as social status, civility, and at first at least, empire. Van Horn's thinking about the active role objects played in early America and their effects on human behaviour is shaped by the network concepts of Bruno Latour, Daniel Miller, and various scholars of the Atlantic world and early empire. The argument is illustrated, literally