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# Museum objects

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*Setting the parameters of material culture studies has always been difficult because the term is capable of a range of definitions, some of them very broad. In this introductory piece, Pearce discusses some of the terms in use and their differing connotations, and suggests that in Museum Studies it is most useful to concentrate upon those relatively small, movable pieces for which 'object' or 'thing' is our term in ordinary speech. 'Artefact' can also be used in the same way, and these three words are best employed without any particular distinctions being made between them, their potential distinctiveness in formal philosophical discourse notwithstanding. 'Material culture' is then the phrase used as a collective noun.*

It will be helpful to clear some paths through the undergrowth by picking out some of the key words relating to museum material, and taking a closer look at them. One group comprises those words which are used to describe an individual piece, or in general terms a number of pieces, and this group includes 'object', 'thing', 'specimen', 'artefact', 'good' usually used in the plural as 'goods', and the term 'material culture' used as a collective noun. All of these terms share common ground in that they all refer to selected lumps of the physical world to which cultural value has been ascribed, a deceptively simple definition which much of this book will be devoted to discussing, but each carries a slightly different shade of meaning because each comes from a distinguishably different tradition of study.

One problem common to them all, and one which throws up the characteristic cleft between philosophical speculation and the everyday meanings attached to words, revolves around the scope to be attributed to them. Strictly speaking, the lumps of the physical world to which cultural value is ascribed include not merely those discrete lumps capable of being moved from one place to another, which is what we commonly mean when we say 'thing' or 'artefact', but also the larger physical world of landscape with all the social structure that it carries, the animal and plant species which have been affected by humankind (and most have), the prepared meals which the animals and plants become, and even the manipulation of flesh and air which produces song and speech. As James Deetz has put it in a famous sentence: 'Material culture is that segment of man's physical environment which is purposely shaped by him according to a culturally dictated plan' (Deetz 1977: 7).

This is to say, in effect, that the whole of cultural expression, one way or another, falls within the realm of material culture, and if analytical definition is pushed to its logical conclusion, that is probably true. It is also true that the material culture held today by

many museums falls within this broader frame, like the areas of industrial landscape which Ironbridge exhibits. However, for the purposes of study, limits must be set, and this book will concentrate upon those movable pieces, those 'discrete lumps' which have always formed, and still form, the bulk of museum holdings and which museums were, and still are, intended to hold.

This brings us to a point of crucial significance. What distinguishes the 'discrete lumps' from the rest – what makes a 'movable piece' in our sense of the term – is the cultural value it is given, and not primarily the technology which has been used to give it form or content, although this is an important mode of value creation. The crucial idea is that of selection, and it is the act of selection which turns a part of the natural world into an object and a museum piece. This is clearly demonstrated by the sample of moon rock which went on display in the Milestones of Flight hall at the National Air and Space Museum, Washington, D.C.:

The moon rock is an actual piece of the moon retrieved by the Apollo 17 mission. There is nothing particularly appealing about the rock; it is a rather standard piece of volcanic basalt some 4 million years old. Yet, unlike many other old rocks, this one comes displayed in an altar-like structure, set in glass, and is complete with full-time guard and an ultrasensitive monitoring device (or so the guards are wont to say). There is a sign above it which reads, 'You may touch it with care.' *Everyone touches it.*

(Meltzer 1981: 121)

The moon rock has been turned into material culture because, through its selection and display, it has become a part of the world of human values, a part which, evidently, every visitor wants to bring within his own personal value system.

What is true of the moon rock is equally true of the stones which the Book of Joshua tells us Joshua commanded the twelve tribes of Israel to collect from the bed of the River Jordan and set up as a permanent memorial of the crossing of the river, and of all other natural objects deliberately placed within human contexts. It is also equally true of the millions of natural history pieces inside museum collections for which 'specimen', meaning an example selected from a group, is our customary term. It is clear that the acquisition of a natural history specimen involves selection according to contemporary principles, detachment from the natural context, and organization into some kind of relationship (many are possible) with other, or different, material. This process turns a 'natural object' into a humanly defined piece, and means that natural history objects and collections, although like all other collections they have their own proper modes and histories of study, can also be treated as material culture and discussed in these terms. The development of contemporary epistemology suggests that no fact can be read transparently. All apparently 'natural' facts are actually discursive facts, since 'nature' is not something already there but is itself the result of historical and social construction. To call something a natural object, as Laclau and Mouffe say (1987: 84), is a way of conceiving it that depends upon a classificatory system: if there were no human beings on earth, stones would still be there, but they would not be 'stones' because there would be neither mineralogy nor language with which to distinguish and classify them. Natural history specimens are therefore as much social constructs as spears or typewriters, and as susceptible to social analysis.

'Thing' is our most ordinary word for all these pieces, and it is also used in everyday speech for the whole range of non-material matters (a similarly elusive word) which have a bearing on our daily lives. 'Object' shares the same slipperiness both in ordinary speech and in intellectual discourse, where it is generally the term used. The ways in

which we use these terms, and the implications of this usage for the ways in which our collective psyche views the material world are very significant. The term 'artefact' means 'made by art or skill' and so takes a narrow view of what constitutes material objects, concentrating upon that part of their nature which involves the application of human technology to the natural world, a process which plays a part in the creation of many, but by no means all, material pieces. Because it is linked with practical skills, and so with words like 'artisan', 'artefact' is a socially low-value term, and one which is correspondingly applied to material deemed to be humble, like ordinary tables and chairs, rather than paintings and sculptures.

'Goods' comes to us from the world of economics and production theory and relates to that aspect of material pieces which embraces the market-place value which is set upon them, and their exchange rate in relation to other similar or different goods and services. This is the treatment of material culture as commodity, and the work of social anthropologists, particularly Douglas and Isherwood (1979), has shown how shallow the purely economic discussion of material is until social or cultural dimensions of value are added to it.

*This paper first appeared in S. Pearce (ed.) (1992) Museums, Objects and Collections, Leicester: Leicester University Press, pp. 4-6.*

## REFERENCES

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