

Thinking about things

Susan M. Pearce

This paper presents another approach to the development of a model for artefact studies, one which draws heavily on an archaeological perspective. The paper also includes an account of McClung Fleming's model, which was developed by Fleming in the context of the study at Winterthur, Delaware, of early American applied arts. Fleming's model has influenced most subsequent work in this model-building area.

In the view of most curators – the present writer among them – collections are at the heart of a museum. In a fundamental sense, the possession of collections, of actual objects and specimens, is what distinguishes a museum from other kinds of institution. These collections are the basis from which spring most forms of museum service. For those of us on the human history side of museums – fine and applied arts scholars, ethnographers, social historians, science and technology historians, military historians and archaeologists – our collections are composed of artefacts, which may be defined as objects made by man through the application of technological processes. In practice, the term 'artefact' is usually reserved for movable pieces rather than structures, and is concerned with inorganic or dead materials; refined arguments over the artefact status of hybrid tea roses or miniature dachshunds need not detain us here.

The curating of artefacts is, therefore, a central concern; but over the years very much less effort has been put into developing the discipline of material culture study than into the other aspects of collection care. This is not surprising; many of us took over collections whose glaring needs were for documentation and storage rather than for artefact study and, in any case, material culture itself was given a low rating by the academic world at large. But four decades of post-war hard-working, professional curatorship have made their mark on our store rooms, while the study of objects is now receiving serious attention, especially among the 'new' anthropologists and archaeologists. Museum material culture studies need to be put upon a fuller and more secure theoretical basis by a willingness to grasp at the large issues, however difficult or elusive some of these may be, or however great a gulf there may seem between the theoretical stance and the poorly documented material, or collections in some of the smaller museums, or the availability of special expertise for study. An awareness of this is reflected in the number of object-orientated articles which have appeared recently (e.g., Porter and Martin 1985).

Objects embody unique information about the nature of man in society: the elucidation of approaches through which this can be unlocked is our task, the unique contribution which museum collections can make to our understanding of ourselves. The potential

insights are fascinating enough in their own right, but they can have many spin-offs for the ways in which we approach exhibitions and museum teaching. Charges of arid intellectualism or elitism are quite beside the mark, for no profession can afford to neglect its theoretical roots.

THE NATURE OF ARTEFACTS

As the linguistic philosophers would tell us, artefacts, man-made objects, are objective in relationship to man, the subject. They have an external reality and so it should be possible to view the whole diversity of artefact types and to distinguish properties possessed by every artefact which are accessible to the appropriate modes of analysis and interpretation, and which together offer us a perception of the role of the artefact in social organization. To put it another way, it should be possible to ask the questions *how, what, when, where, by whom* and *why* about every artefact, and to achieve interesting answers.

Bearing these questions in mind, a useful way of organizing the properties of an object for the purposes of artefact study is to divide these into four main areas: *material*, which includes raw material, design, construction and technology; *history*, which includes a descriptive account of its function and use; *environment*, involving all its spatial relationships; and *significance*, which embraces its emotional or psychological messages. The sum of our understanding of these properties may be described as the interpretation.

MODELS FOR ARTEFACT STUDIES

Most of the work aimed at putting artefact studies on a systematic and coherent footing has been based upon this kind of approach to the properties of objects, and much of it has been carried out in North America. One of the pioneer papers was that by Montgomery (1961) in which he distinguished a series of fourteen 'steps or exercises' through which the connoisseur might achieve his goal of determining 'the date and place of manufacture; the author if possible; and where within the range of its fellows the object stands in terms of its condition, excellence of execution and success as a work of art.'

The steps cover artefact attributes like form, materials analysis, techniques employed, function, history and evaluation, all of which in one guise or another will always form part of any formal artefact study; but the emphasis on connoisseurship and the assumption that the trained eye can judge an artefact's 'success as a work of art' confines its application to the field of European/North American applied art, for which, indeed, Montgomery developed it. For the material culture field as a whole, words like 'success' and 'failure' are an irrelevance, although the quality of the object compared with others of its kind in the eyes of both its maker and user and of its students, will be important in our overall understanding of the piece, and we should aspire not simply to evaluation but to ways of understanding why an object's values have a particular character and why these are important.

Like Montgomery, E. McClung Fleming developed his approaches in connection with the Winterthur Museum – University of Delaware study programme in Early American Culture, and in 1974 he published a proposed model for artefact studies. This model, as Fleming says, uses two conceptual tools – a five-fold classification of the properties of an artefact, its history, material, construction, design and function, and a set of four operations to be performed on these properties in association with supplementary information

(Fig. 18.1). Each operation may involve each of the five properties; identification is the foundation for everything that follows and interpretation is the crown.

Fleming's model is applicable across the range of material culture, and we have cause to be grateful for its systematic presentation. In scheme, it adopts a cross-referencing approach in which a series of properties and analyses are applied to each other, and this can be cumbersome when an individual artefact is being studied. More fundamentally, the properties distinguished are open to criticism. The construction and design of an artefact are too closely related to stand separately and may be regarded as aspects of its material body. The practical function is concerned with how the piece has been used and is therefore better regarded as a part of its history. The spatial relationships of the artefact are omitted as an integral attribute, to emerge only during the process of cultural analysis. The significance property of the object is obscured by the word 'function' used in the paper to cover both uses and roles, described as including delight and communication as 'unintended



Fig. 18.1 Model for artefact studies (after E. McClung Fleming 1974)

functions', an adjective which begs a great many questions. The cultural analysis operation will indicate how objects convey status, ideas and so on, as Fleming rightly says, and he suggests some ways in which this may carry artefact study beyond description towards explanation, but this endeavour is capable of considerable expansion and difficult although it undoubtedly is, it must be our prime concern.

The model for artefact studies proposed here (Fig. 18.2) is framed around the properties which were distinguished in the earlier section. The column of boxes on the left develops the theme of artefact properties, while that on the right suggests the studies and analyses appropriate to each property. The obvious starting point is the object's physical body, the components from which it has been constructed, and any ornament which may have been added to them, and so an artefact study will begin with a physical description of the piece. This will include a full written description of the construction and ornamentation cast in the appropriate technical language, together with relevant measurements, drawings, photographs and X-ray photographs, or in other words, the normal documentation which, circumstances permitting, a curator would hope to include as part of basic accessioning.

The identification of these physical attributes and their rationalization into a cluster of significant characteristics which make up the overall design of the piece (in a non-aesthetic sense) enable it to be compared with other artefacts of its own broad type so that its position on its typological band can be established, at any rate to a degree. The typological approach to artefact study has come in for a good deal of criticism over recent years. It can readily be argued that the rationalization of significant characteristics referred to above is so subjective a process that types are born not among the objects themselves, but in the curator's mind, from whence they issue to impose categories into which the objects are forced to fit, if necessary by special pleading. However, this will not do. Objects do relate to each other in an objective sense, they do fall into groups with shared characteristics and it is our business to use our minds so that these groupings may emerge.

Once the principle of typological grouping has been conceded, there are techniques which endeavour to minimize the subjective element. Most of these involve the recording of a wide range of measurements and the processing of these by a computer, which can be used to establish object groups in which the members all fall within limited bands. In the writer's experience, gained in the study of Bronze Age metalwork, these approaches take us little further forward. The same object groups are thrown up by the computer as are yielded by hand-and-eye sorting, and in both cases the same awkward pieces are left over to linger in grey areas of uncertainty. Be that as it may, the comparison of a newly acquired silver spoon, for example, with other spoons, or of a newly discovered portrait with the line and brushwork of other portraits, will remain a fundamental technique to aid in dating and provenancing.

The third pair of boxes in Fig. 18.2 cover the material characterization of the artefact – that is, the analysis of the materials of which the object is made, in order to establish the provenance of the metal, stone, clay, wood and so on, and the ways in which these have been treated before and during the manufacture of the piece. The application of the appropriate petrological, metallurgical and other scientific techniques have been for some years commonplace in the study of strictly archaeological objects and also of fine art pieces, but they are beginning to be employed with social history, applied art material and ethnography, and it is clear that if analysis programmes could be developed in these fields on the kind of scale to which they have been applied, say, to prehistoric pottery, then the yield in knowledge could be very considerable and long vistas across patterns of exchange and industrial techniques would be opened up.

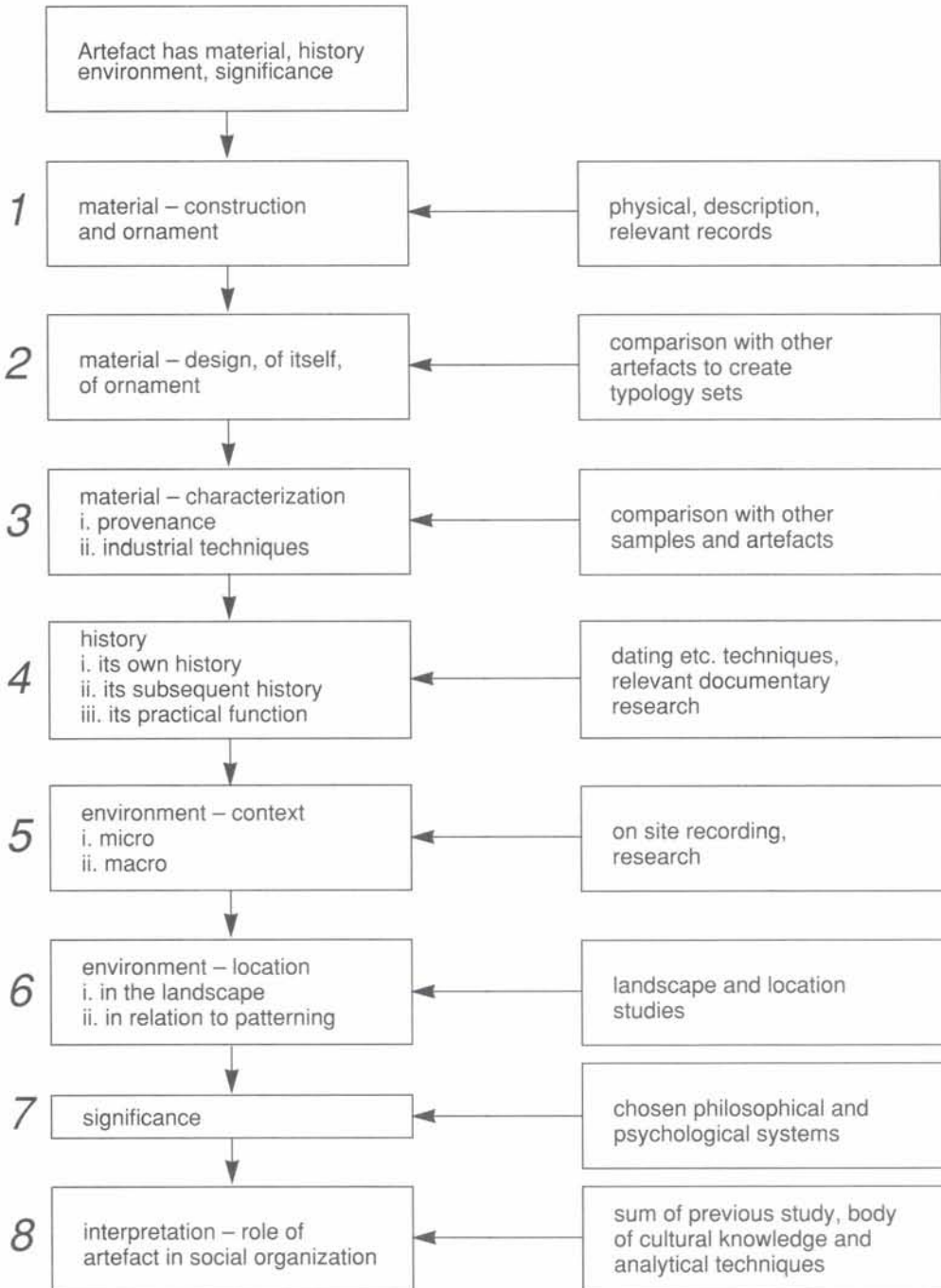


Fig. 18.2 Proposed model for artefact studies

From the material characteristics of an artefact, we may turn to its history. This conveniently divides into two: its 'own' history, that is the details (in so far as these may be recovered) of its maker and manufacture, and its use in its own time and place; and its subsequent history of collection, publication and exhibition. This will involve the appropriate scientific dating techniques and historical research into contemporary and other relevant documents in order to establish details of the maker's career and associations, and as many facts about the object as possible. Closely linked with this is investigation which aims to establish the function of the object in its own time and perhaps subsequently: wooden shuttles which once formed a part of the mechanized looms in the Lancashire mills are now converted to hold thermometers and decorate domestic sitting-rooms.

Objects exist in a locational relationship to other artefacts and to the landscape and the study of these relationships can be very fruitful for our understanding of the role of the artefact. Inevitably, material in old collections will lack much of the necessary recorded detail and the insights which this might have conveyed are irretrievably lost, but the opportunities are there for material now being accessioned. In order to understand this dimension of the artefact it is necessary to establish its context, divisible into the micro-context, covering, say, the cubic metre of the object's immediate environment and giving details of surrounding related objects, containers, debris and so on; and the macro-context, which can be as wide as seems helpful, and will certainly involve details of the workshop, church or bedroom from which the artefact came, and the building, settlement or parish in which these were situated. To take an obvious example, it adds considerably to our appreciation of a Friendly Society's brass staff head if we can know what it was normally stored with, and where it was kept.

The plotting of distribution maps of typological sets of objects in the landscape has been a standard archaeological technique since the pioneering days, and it is intended to show the patterning of artefact classes in the context of natural geology, upland and lowland, river systems, travel routes and resources of food and raw materials. This approach is used to a much lesser extent in the other material culture disciplines, probably, one suspects, because much of the detailed work upon which it depends still remains to be undertaken; for example, the distribution of particular classes of goods from recent small, local manufacturing centres in both urban and rural districts has not yet been much studied, but when it has, it will need to be analysed along these lines.

The application of the techniques of the human geographers, particularly those of the location analysis school like Lösch and Christaller (usefully summarized and discussed in Haggett 1956) are in the same case. The work of these men and their increasingly sophisticated followers and critics suggests that social life forms patterns in the landscape which are repetitive and which reflect in their character the character of the society concerned. The application of their approaches also depends upon the creation of object types through detailed local work, but it would be interesting to build up bodies of information about material in our collections which would enable us to plot locational patterns of blacksmiths' shops, village general stores or potteries large and small in relation to the areas which they served and to other social territories like parishes.

Finally, we are bound to consider the significance of the artefact, for its own time and place and for ourselves, since these are often different: a nineteenth-century Yoruba mask had one set of significances for the Yoruba and a rather different set for the twentieth-century collector. Here we face the question of the psychological role of the artefact, and in some ways this, together with material characterization, touches most closely the heart of artefact studies, since it is objects – tangible, external, enduring objects – which can

embody a freight of emotional significance, collective and individual, and so it is in the development of insights here that material culture scholars may be able to make their most important particular contribution to our understanding of men in society.

Objects are important to people because they demonstrate prestige and social position; in social terms, most of the pieces which survive in our fine and applied art and costume collections do so for this reason. Objects, especially those in the religious or ceremonial spheres or those made from highly valued materials like precious metal, amber or ivory, symbolize states of mind and social relationships between men and men, and men and their gods, in a unique way. Ceremonial objects take their form from a combination of socially appropriate craftwork and impulses deriving from a profound level in the human psyche: Victoria Crosses are cast in bronze because metal-casting was pre-eminent among the mid-nineteenth-century industrial techniques, but their cross shape follows Christian ideas of passion and sacrifice deeply embedded in the western tradition.

Is it possible to analyse these roles in a more systematic way, to produce a theoretical basis which will render them intelligible in a more universal and less specific fashion? A follower of Jung might argue that we invest with symbolic significance those objects which form bridges between the conscious and unconscious or shadow elements in our personalities, helping us to come to terms with socially undesirable characteristics. It is arguable that what we mean when we talk of beauty in an object is superb hand-and-eye craftsmanship linked with a subject and a perceptive treatment of that subject which corresponds most closely to our needs for inner reconciliation and reassurance. The choice of subject and the expression of the insights with which it is clothed will differ from one society to another; beauty is in the eye of the beholder. A structuralist, following Lévi-Strauss and his disciples, might seek to establish opposed pairs of material types, or object types, and to link these into the binary structure of human society and the human mind; McGhee (1977) has suggested that among the Eskimo caribou antler and walrus ivory occupy the material culture sphere in a set of opposed pairs which, together with the other pairs in the set, land/sea, summer/winter and man/woman, structure Eskimo life. Objects would then take their place alongside other creations of man-in-society, like kinship systems or settlement plans, all manifesting universal patterns underlying immense superficial variety.

The last pair of boxes in Fig. 18.2 represent the final phase in an artefact study, the interpretation. This will bring together the yield of information and insight already gathered, and will deploy the fullest possible suite of social analyses – knowledge of the local kinship patterns, authority, structures, economy forms and so on – in order to form a view of the meaning of the object in its society, in the way, for example, that Nigel Barley has discussed the significance of textiles among the Dowagos of North Cameroon (1983).

SOME CONCLUSIONS

Several conclusions seem to arise from this discussion. It must be repeated that not all the material now in our collections is capable of responding to these approaches, nor can we expect to study all our material in equal depth; but one of the aims of this paper has been to set out an approach to artefact study which can potentially be applied across the range of material culture, although obviously artefacts will differ in the degree to which they will respond to the various techniques. It is no accident that some of the approaches discussed here are likely to be more familiar to archaeologists and anthropologists than they are to students in the other material culture fields and one of my hopes in writing this paper is to encourage discussion here.

Some of the topics broached here, particularly the symbolic and structuralist interpretations, together with the other interpretive techniques, are very important subjects, which I hope to pursue in further articles. Meanwhile this paper and this model for artefact studies is offered as a contribution to the debate.

This paper first appeared in Museums Journal 85(4) (1986), pp. 198–201.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am very grateful to Jim Roberts who prepared the two figures.

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