

# *Mind in matter: an introduction to material culture theory and method*

Jules Prown

*Jules Prown also works from a background in the applied arts, although he is very aware of theoretical developments in the fields of social studies and linguistics. Prown's approach, which is not tabulated into diagrammatic form, offers three stages of analysis: description, deduction and speculation, and possesses the great advantage of admitting the subjective nature of much analysis, and of bringing the interpreter's understanding and response into the interpretative frame.*

## METHODOLOGY

How does one extract information about culture, about mind, from mute objects? We have been taught to retrieve information in abstract form, words, and numbers, but most of us are functionally illiterate when it comes to interpreting information encoded in objects. Several academic disciplines, notably art history and archaeology, routinely work with artefacts as evidence and over the years have built up a considerable amount of theoretical and methodological expertise. Work done in these fields is often directed inward, towards the accumulation and explication of information required by the discipline itself. In the history of art this takes the form of resolving questions of stylistic and iconographic influence, of dating and authorship, of quality and authenticity. In archaeology it is the basic task of assembling, sorting, dating and quantifying the assembled data. But art history and archaeology also have fundamental concerns with the cultures that produced the objects, and the methodologies of these two fields, to the extent that they provide means for the interpretation of culture, are essential to material culture. At present they are the two disciplines most directly relevant to the actual work of investigating material culture. But, as they are usually defined, they are not adequate to the total task. The exploration of patterns of belief and behaviour, in an intellectual borderland where the interests of humanities and social sciences merge, requires an openness to other methodologies, including those of cultural and social history, cultural and social anthropology, psycho-history, sociology, cultural geography, folklore and folk life, and linguistics. But the approach to material culture set forth below dictates that these broader concerns and methodologies *not* be brought into play until the evidence of the artefact itself has been plumbed as objectively as possible. Therefore the first steps are most closely related to the basic descriptive techniques of art history and archaeology, and in this there is more overlap with the natural than with the social sciences. The initial descriptive steps in the approach to objects resembles fieldwork in a science such as geology, and description can also involve the use of scientific equipment.

The method of object analysis proposed below progresses through three stages. To keep the distorting biases of the investigator's cultural perspective in check, these stages must be undertaken in sequence and kept as discrete as possible. The analysis proceeds from *description*, recording the internal evidence of the object itself; to *deduction*, interpreting the interaction between the object and the perceiver; to *speculation*, framing hypotheses and questions which lead out from the object to external evidence for testing and resolution.<sup>1</sup>

## Description

Description is restricted to what can be observed in the object itself, that is, to internal evidence. In practice, it is desirable to begin with the largest, most comprehensive observations and progress systematically to more particular details. The terminology should be as accurate as possible; technical terms are fine as long as they can be understood. The analyst must, however, continually guard against the intrusion of either subjective assumptions or conclusions derived from other experience.

This is a synchronic exercise; the physical object is read at a particular moment in time. The object is almost certainly not identical to what it was when it was fabricated; time, weather, usage will all have taken their toll. At this stage no consideration is given to condition or to other diachronic technological, iconographic or stylistic influences.

## Substantial analysis

Description begins with substantial analysis, an account of the physical dimensions, material and articulation of the object. To determine physical dimensions, the object is measured and perhaps weighed. The degree of precision depends on the interests of the investigator. If he will be considering a series of objects, a certain amount of precision is desirable, given the possible subsequent significance of and need for quantification. However, it is not desirable to carry decimals to the point of losing an immediate sense of dimension in a welter of numbers; real significance may lie in general measure, as with Glassie's discovery of the modal importance of spans and cubits in the vernacular architecture of Virginia.<sup>2</sup> Next comes a description of the materials – what they are, how extensively they are used, and the pattern of their distribution throughout the object. Finally, the ways in which the materials are put together in the fabrication of the object, the articulation, should be noted. For example, with fabrics one would look at the weave; with metals, the welding, soldering, riveting; with wood, the dovetails, dowels, mitre joints, mortise-and-tenon joints, glue.

Substantial analysis is a descriptive physical inventory of the object. It is achieved with the assistance of whatever technical apparatus is appropriate and available. Simple tape measures and scales, ultraviolet lamps and infrared photographs, or complex electron microscopes and X-ray diffraction machines are all basically enhancements of one's ability to perceive and take the measure of the physical properties and dimensions of the object.<sup>3</sup>

## Content

The next step in description is analysis of content. The investigator is concerned simply with subject matter. This is usually a factor only with works of art or other decorated objects. The procedure is iconography in its simplest sense, a reading of overt representations. In the case of a painting, this may simply be what is represented, as if the work were a window on the world (or on some kind of world). Content may include

decorative designs or motifs, inscriptions, coats of arms, or diagrams, engraved or embossed on metal, carved or painted on wood or stone, woven in textiles, moulded or etched in glass.

### Formal analysis

Finally, and very important, is analysis of the object's form or configuration, its visual character. It is useful to begin by describing the two-dimensional organization – lines and areas – either on the surface of a flat object or in elevations or sections through a solid object.<sup>4</sup> Next comes the three-dimensional organization of forms in space, whether actual in a three-dimensional object or represented in a pictorial object. Subsequently, other formal elements such as colour, light and texture should be analysed with, as in the case of the initial description of materials, an account of their nature, extent and pattern of distribution (rhythm) in each case. Determination of the degree of detail must be left to the discretion of the investigator; too much can be almost as bad as too little: the forest can be lost for the trees.

### Deduction

The second stage of analysis moves from the object itself to the relationship between the object and the perceiver. It involves the empathetic linking of the material (actual) or represented world of the object with the perceiver's world of existence and experience. To put it another way, the analyst contemplates what it would be like to use or interact with the object, or, in the case of a representational object, to be transported empathetically into the depicted world. If conditions permit, he handles, lifts, uses, walks through, or experiments physically with the object. The paramount criterion for deductions drawn from this interaction is that they must meet the test of reasonableness and common sense; that is, most people, on the basis of their knowledge of the physical world and the evidence of their own life experience, should find the deductions to be unstrained interpretations of the evidence elicited by the description. If these deductions are not readily acceptable as reasonable, they must be considered hypothetical and deferred to the next stage.

Although the analyst in the deductive stage moves away from a concern solely with the internal evidence of the object and injects himself into the investigation, the process remains synchronic. Just as the object is only what it is at the moment of investigation, and as such may be more or less different from what it was when it was made, so too the analyst is what he is at the moment of investigation. Ten years hence he might respond differently to the object because of different interests and a different mix of life experiences near the surface of conscious awareness. The particular encounter between an object with its history and an individual with his history shapes the deductions. Neither is what they were nor what they may become. Yet the event does not occur within a vacuum. The object is at least in some ways what it was or bears some recognizable relationship to what it was; the same, although less germane, is true of the investigator. The object may not testify with complete accuracy about its culture, but it can divulge something. It is the analyst's task to find out what it can tell and, perhaps, deduce what it can no longer tell.

### Sensory engagement

The first step in deduction is sensory experience of the object. If possible, one touches it to feel its texture and lifts it to know its heft. Where appropriate, consideration should be given to the physical adjustments a user would have to make to its size, weight, configuration and texture. The experience of architecture or a townscape would involve sensory



perceptions while moving through it. If the object is not accessible, then these things must be done imaginatively and empathetically. In the case of a picture, the engagement is necessarily empathetic; the analyst projects himself into the represented world (or, in Alois Riegl's sense, considers that the pictorial space continues into the viewer's world of existence) and records what he would see, hear, smell, taste and feel.<sup>5</sup>

### Intellectual engagement

The second step is intellectual apprehension of the object. With a tool or implement this is a consideration of what it does and how it does it, and in such cases may need to precede or accompany the sensory engagement. The degree of understanding at this stage (prior to the admission of external evidence) depends on the complexity of the object and the analyst's prior knowledge and experience. It is unnecessary to ignore what one knows and feign innocence for the appearance of objectivity, but it is desirable to test one's external knowledge to see if it can be deduced from the object itself and, if it cannot, to set that knowledge aside until the next stage.

In the case of a pictorial object, there are a number of questions that may be addressed to and answered by the object itself, especially if it is representational. What is the time of day? What is the season of the year? What is the effect on what is depicted of natural forces such as heat and cold or the pull of gravity? In the relation between the depicted world and our world, where are we positioned, what might we be doing, and what role, if any, might we play? How would we enter pictorial space? What transpired prior to the depicted moment? What may happen next?

### Emotional response

Finally, there is the matter of the viewer's emotional response to the object. Reactions vary in kind, intensity and specificity, but it is not uncommon to discover that what one considered a subjective response is in fact widely shared. A particular object may trigger joy, fright, awe, perturbation, revulsion, indifference, curiosity or other responses that can be quite subtly distinguished. These subjective reactions, difficult but by no means impossible to articulate, tend to be significant to the extent that they are generally shared. They point the way to specific insights when the analyst identifies the elements noted in the descriptive stage that have precipitated them.

I have stressed the importance of attempting to maintain rigorous discreteness and sequence in the stages of object analysis. In fact, this is difficult if not impossible to achieve. Deductions almost invariably creep into the initial description. These slips, usually unnoticed by the investigator, are undesirable since they undercut objectivity. But in practice, while striving to achieve objectivity and to maintain the scientific method as an ideal, the investigator should not be so rigorous and doctrinaire in the application of methodological rigour as to inhibit the process. Vigilance, not martial law, is the appropriate attitude. Often an individual's subjective assumptions are not recognized as such until considerably later. In fact, it is instructive in regard to understanding one's own cultural biases, one's own cultural perspective, to mark those assumptions that remain undetected the longest in the descriptive stage. These are often the most deeply rooted cultural assumptions.

### Speculation

Having progressed from the object itself in description to the interaction between object and perceiver in deduction, the analysis now moves completely to the mind of the perceiver, to *speculation*. There are few rules or proscriptions at this stage. What is

desired is as much creative imagining as possible, the free association of ideas and perceptions tempered only, and then not too quickly, by the analyst's common sense and judgement as to what is even vaguely plausible.

## Theories and hypotheses

The first step in speculation is to review the information developed in the descriptive and deductive stages and to formulate hypotheses. This is the time of summing up what has been learned from the internal evidence of the object itself, turning those data over in one's mind, developing theories that might explain the various effects observed and felt. Speculation takes place in the mind of the investigator, and his cultural stance now becomes a major factor. However, since the objective and deductive evidence is already in hand, this cultural bias has little distorting effect. Indeed, it is an asset rather than a liability; it fuels the creative work that now must take place. Because of cultural perspective, it is impossible to respond to and interpret the object in exactly the same way as did the fabricating society, or any other society that may have been exposed to and reacted to the object during its history and peregrinations. Where there is a common response, it provides an affective insight into the cultural values of another society. Where there is divergence, the distinctive cultural perspective of our society can illuminate unseen and even unconscious aspects of the other culture. There was gravity before Newton; there was economic determinism before Marx; there was sex before Freud. We are free to use the insights afforded by our cultural and historical perspective, as long as we do not make the mistake of assigning intentionality or even awareness to the fabricating culture. Our cultural distance from the culture of the object precludes affective experience of those beliefs that are at variance with our own belief systems, but the process now begun can lead to the recovery of some of those beliefs. That is a goal of the exercise.

## Programme of research

The second step in the speculative stage is developing a programme for validation, that is, a plan for scholarly investigation of questions posed by the material evidence. This shifts the enquiry from analysis of internal evidence to the search for and investigation of external evidence. Now the methodologies and techniques of various disciplines can be brought into play according to the nature of the questions raised and the skills and inclinations of the scholar.

The object is not abandoned after the preliminary analysis – description, deduction, speculation – is complete and the investigation has moved to external evidence. There should be continual shunting back and forth between the outside evidence and the artefact as research suggests to the investigator the need for more descriptive information or indicates other hypotheses that need to be tested affectively.

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## NOTES

- 1 The issue of sequence undoubtedly needs further study. I am aware that the insistence upon strict adherence to a particular series of steps seems rigid and arbitrary, an uncalled-for fettering of the investigator. Yet, I have come to appreciate the virtues of sequence empirically on the basis of considerable classroom experience with artefact analysis. It simply works better. The closer the sequence suggested below is followed, especially in regard to the major stages, and the greater the care taken with each analytical step before proceeding, the more penetrating, complex and satisfying the final interpretation. Obviously, the procedure is time-consuming, and there is a natural impatience to move along.

My experience has been, however, that this should be resisted until the analysis is exhausted and the obvious next question requires advancing to the next step.

- 2 Henry Glassie (1975) *Folk Housing in Middle Virginia: A Structural Analysis of Historic Artifacts*, Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press.
- 3 The procedures outlined here for collecting internal evidence have other significant applications. Physical analysis, including the use of scientific apparatus, can provide crucial information in regard to authenticity. Other procedures noted below, notably formal analysis, can also be exceedingly useful in determining authenticity. These applications of the methodology can take place at any time, but it is preferable for the issue of authenticity to be resolved before the analysis proceeds beyond *description*. If a material culture investigator is to arrive at cultural conclusions on the basis of material evidence, the specimen being studied *must* be an authentic product of the culture in question. The investigator must determine what aspects of the objects, if any, are not authentic products of the presumed culture. A fake may be a useful artefact in relation to the culture that produced the fake, but it is deceptive in relation to the feigned culture.
- 4 The procedures of formal analysis summarized briefly here will be familiar to any art historian. They are not, however, arcane, and investigators need not be specially trained. Formal analysis is a matter of articulating and recording what one sees, preferably in a systematic sequence as suggested here.
- 5 See Sheldon Nodelman (1970) 'Structural analysis in art and anthropology', in Jacques Ehrmann (ed.) *Structuralism*, Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor Books/Doubleday, 87. This splendid article sets forth succinctly the basis for contemporary structural analysis in the early art historical work of the German school of *Strukturforschung*, especially as initiated by Riegl and developed by Guido von Kaschnitz-Weinberg, and the *anthropologie structurale* of Claude Lévi-Strauss.