

BOOK REVIEW

Learning from Things: Method and Theory of Material Culture Studies. Edited by W. David Kingery. Washington, D. C., Smithsonian Institution Press, 1996: 262 p.

David Kingery, a renowned ceramic engineer, has dedicated the past decade or so of his career to archaeology. Specifically, he has focused his energy on the cross-disciplinary investigation of material culture. Through his own research, and more importantly by sponsoring interdisciplinary conferences and providing the framework for easier between-college study at the University of Arizona, he has been successful in breaking down traditional barriers. This endeavor, however, is like swimming upstream against an ever-increasing current, as the trend in science is to become more specialized and to communicate less with people outside one's narrow interest. In this climate, interdisciplinary communication is more important than ever, and Kingery is to be commended for his dogged determination to make it happen. This book, assembled from a series of papers presented at a conference held at the Smithsonian Institution, grapples with the facts that the study of material culture is inherently interdisciplinary, and that the relationship between people and things is multileveled yet understandable. Kingery's guiding principle is that "things . . . are probably the truest representations we have of values and meanings within a society" (ix).

After an introduction by Kingery, the volume is divided into four sections: Paradigms for Material Culture Studies, Material Culture in the History of Technology, Formation Processes, and Materials Science in Material Culture Studies. The diversity of these approaches suggests that the relationship between people and things is so rich that there is plenty of room for investigative variety. In Kingery's words, "Artifacts are tools, as well as signals, signs, and symbols" (p. 1). But J. D. Prown makes the observation that investigators can come from very different and often opposing perspectives, using the analogy of the age-old feud between the "cowman and farmer", with the farmer being the hard scientist and the cowman the soft scientist. Neither approach, according to Prown, is inherently superior. Reality "probably resides neither in the artifact and its contextual data . . . nor in the culturally conditioned mind of the perceiver" (p. 26).

One difficulty inherent in books written by scholars from varied disciplines is ambiguity of audience. And in this volume some chapters seem to be written for a general audience, others for people only outside the field under discussion, and still others for people within the discipline. The latter is best represented by Joseph Corn, who writes a self-reflexive chapter on whether historians of technology actually consider things. He examined articles from *Technology and Culture* and found that slightly more than half of the authors do not deal with objects at all and that only 15% (mostly archaeologists) used any material data. But Corn finds, after interviewing many of the authors, that they actually had prior knowledge of the material discussed in their work and at some point in their life many had an "artifactual apprenticeship". Acknowledging that a working knowledge of the material of interest is important, Corn appeals directly to his colleagues to make more explicit their artifactual apprenticeships.

The other extreme is provided by many of the chapters in Part Four (Materials Science in Material Culture Studies), in which the authors are speaking predominantly to non-materials scientists. The chapters by D. Killick and M. S. Tite, on microscopy and dating, respectively, offer summaries designed for the nonspecialist. Kingery's chapter does explore the role of materials science in material culture studies, but I wish archaeologists would become more engaged in this debate.

If we are to fully understand the relationship between people and things, we must also consider the role of gender in shaping our perceptions of technology, as R. Oldenziel does in exploring the evolu-

ing relationship between material objects and other aspects of technology. She argues that taxonomies used by historians of technology carry implicit gender codings that highlight production instead of consumption. By redefining the boundaries of objects to include not only creation but use, one obtains a fuller, engendered perception of that technology.

One key to understanding material culture, past and present, is formation processes. That is, scholars of material culture must understand how their evidence has come to be. The authors in Part Three explore how objects from private and personal collections and historical records are both collected and preserved. M. B. Schiffer describes the diverse sources he used, including collectors, companies and trade magazines, to get information about subminiature tubes in portable radios. K. Kristiansen explores the political and economic factors that led to museum formation and eventually preservation laws in Denmark. He notes that museums were formed and collections grew because development was destroying archaeological sites. Once museum collections were full and the pace of development slowed, site preservation laws were implemented. I especially enjoyed M. Akin's paper exploring the formation of private collections. She investigated the processes that led to private collections, but more importantly she discussed how much the composition of a particular collection tells us about the collector. The Great Basin of the United States has a long history of ethnographic field work, and C. S. and D. D. Fowler explore the formation of museum collections of that material predominantly between 1871 and 1940. They not only discuss the biases inherent in collecting, but they describe how much of the early material was poorly documented and badly curated, with information either lost or destroyed as a result. In the final paper in this section, Parezo explores the processes governing the formation of archival records and the wide range of behaviors by scholars that ultimately produces this written historical record.

Humans, unlike any other species, cannot be considered apart from their things. This book is part of the ongoing quest to understand the complex relationship between people and their artifacts. The readers of *Radiocarbon* may not learn much from the materials science section, because its chapters (including the one on dating by Tite) are simply summaries meant for the nonspecialist. But the primary message of this section is the way technical analyses interdigitate with material culture studies. Apart from the minor stylistic flaw of a citation style that is inconsistent from one chapter to the next, this is overall a well-written and well-edited volume that has much to offer to those who "learn from things".

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