

LEICESTER READERS IN MUSEUM STUDIES

INTERPRETING
OBJECTS
and
COLLECTIONS



Edited by

SUSAN M. PEARCE



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*Interpreting Objects and
Collections*

Leicester Readers in Museum Studies
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Edited by Susan M. Pearce



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Series preface

Museums are established institutions, but they exist in a changing world. The modern notion of a museum and its collections runs back into the sixteenth or even fifteenth centuries, and the origins of the earliest surviving museums belong to the period soon after. Museums have subsequently been and continue to be founded along these well-understood lines. But the end of the second millennium AD and the advent of the third point up the new needs and preoccupations of contemporary society. These are many, but some can be picked out as particularly significant here. Access is crucially important: access to information, the decision-making process and resources like gallery space, and access by children, ethnic minorities, women and the disadvantaged and underprivileged. Similarly, the nature of museum work itself needs to be examined, so that we can come to a clearer idea of the nature of the institution and its material, of what museum professionalism means, and how the issues of management and collection management affect outcomes. Running across all these debates is the recurrent theme of the relationship between theory and practice in what is, in the final analysis, an important area of work.

New needs require fresh efforts at information-gathering and understanding, and the best possible access to important literature for teaching and study. It is this need which the Leicester Sources in Museum Studies series addresses. The series as a whole breaks new ground by bringing together, for the first time, an important body of published work, much of it very recent, much of it taken from journals which few libraries carry, and all of it representing fresh approaches to the study of the museum operation.

The series has been divided into six volumes each of which covers a significant aspect of museum studies. These six topics bear a generic relationship to the modular arrangement of the Leicester Department of Museum Studies postgraduate course in Museum Studies, but, more fundamentally, they reflect current thinking about museums and their study. Within each volume, each editor has been responsible for his or her choice of papers. Each volume reflects the approach of its own editor, and the different feel of the various traditions and discourses upon which it draws. The range of individual emphases and the diversity of points of view is as important as the overarching theme in which each volume finds its place.

It is our intention to produce a new edition of the volumes in the series every three years, so that the selection of papers for inclusion is a continuing process and the contemporary stance of the series is maintained. All the editors of the series are happy to receive suggestions for inclusions (or exclusions), and details of newly published material.

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Introduction

The starting point for this volume of collected papers (as for all other similar work undertaken by the editor) is the belief that museums exist to hold particular objects and specimens which have come to us from the past (i.e. the period up to midnight yesterday), that museums therefore constitute a specific social phenomenon with a unique and explicit role in the western scheme of things, and that material arrives in museums as a result of practice (or practices) which can be described as collecting. It is, therefore, incumbent upon the investigator to try to find ways in which, first, the social meanings of individual objects can be unravelled; second, the significance of the museum as a cultural institution can be understood; and third the processes through which objects become component parts of collections, and collections themselves acquire collective significance, can be appreciated.

These are enormous topics, because material objects are as much a part of the weave of our lives as our bodies are; indeed these two aspects of our lives have the fundamental characteristic of physicality not possessed by most other facets of our existence. The papers collected here are primarily intended to illuminate the first of these topics and the last, the meaning of objects and the nature of collecting, and therefore have a relevance which extends beyond material formally received by a museum, into the world of objects in normal social use, and that of private collections. But because all existing museum material was once, one way or another, a part of these twin processes, an understanding of them is fundamental to museum practice.

This volume also stems from the conviction that both objects and collections can and should be studied in their own right, as part of the broader pattern of cultural studies. The reader will not, therefore, find here papers which are written from the perspectives of the traditional disciplines of art history, archaeology and so on, although, of course, many themes overlap, and cultural analysis, in any case, draws from the same wells of philosophy, psychology and historiography that water discipline studies. One particular point needs to be made. I would contend that specimens from the natural world work within human society in exactly the same ways as human artefactual material, whatever they may do in nature and under only the eye of God. They are a part of the human construction of the world both as single pieces and (but rather more obviously) as collections. However, it must be admitted that the great majority of the texts here are written in terms of artefactual rather than natural material (that great distinction at the heart of early museology), and acknowledgement of natural science specimens is only, as it were, by the way. This is a great pity, and it is to be hoped that we shall soon have a body of writing which helps us to understand natural history as culture.

The structure of this volume reflects the distinction between studying objects as such, and studying those groups of objects which we usually think of as 'collections', however difficult

this notion may be to define. The amount of study which has been devoted to these topics is very uneven. The meanings of objects has been the subject of a body of research, usually called material culture theory, which reaches back immediately to the 1960s and beyond that to the pioneers of archaeology (largely) in the mid- and later nineteenth century. Collection studies is a new field, which has found a place in the broader scope of cultural studies only in the course of the last decade or so, although of course individual collections and collectors have been the subjects of a huge range of publications, mostly directed either at discipline or at biographical perspectives. Nevertheless, the two groups of papers presented here are deliberately of more or less the same length, in order to reflect the work which has been done and to represent the equal weight accorded to the two aspects of objects.

The relationship of the two aspects needs to be made clear. It is, of course, obvious, that all collected objects begin life outside a collection, and it is possible to build up individual biographies for particular objects which cover first their lives in general circulation, then their entry into a collection, and then perhaps the entry of that collection into an established museum, with its concurrent professional repertoire of documentation, display, photography and publication. The life story of an object may not run as smoothly as this; for the great majority of objects, as of people, it does not. There may be episodes in which the object comes and goes within various collected relationships, as collections are assembled and then broken up. There may be phases in which the object is lost to sight, literally in the case of excavated material, figuratively perhaps when objects find their ways into attics and cellars. Objects can be subject to great fluctuations in value, when despised rubbish becomes first collectable and finally major acquisition; in fact, the capacity of objects to stimulate social changes of this kind is one of their most fascinating characteristics, and one in which the process of collecting plays a major part. Nevertheless, all individual vicissitudes notwithstanding, there seems to be a qualitative difference between objects in circulation and objects in collection, and this distinction is most easily approached through the use of a simple semiotic scheme which employs the basic Saussurian notions.

Fig. 0.1 shows how this analysis works. Each society—let us say that of late twentieth-century Britain—operates within social parameters which are, broadly, the legacy of the historical past, up to and including the immediate past. As a result of this we have available to us in the social structure the *langue*, a body of objects, material culture, with which to produce our social lives. In order to create social sense, these are structured according to generally understood categories, and give rise to the *parole*, the actual objects in daily circulation doing their social jobs. Because objects (like everything else) are only meaningful in relation to each other, these social objects work in groups or sets, and are so shown in the diagram. So, for example, because we have become a highly literate, bureaucratic culture as a result of our history, our ideas about appropriate objects include writing materials, structured into categories which both reflect and reinforce social norms. These give rise to the actual object sets in use, the different sets of pens, pencils, paper blocks, blotting-pads, desk toys, tables and chairs, and so on, as are thought appropriate to children, teenage girls, elderly ladies and business executives.

These objects in circulation are the subject of material culture study, which aims to show how and why they have meaning as they come and go in use. But we and objects together are capable of entering into a qualitatively different kind of relationship, the relationship here described as collecting. Obviously, the same broad social parameters come into play, as the linking time arrow shows, although more or less change may have taken place, depending upon the extent of the time lapse. The earlier *parole*, i.e. the writing materials in circulation, becomes part of the *langue*, the material to be worked upon, in the second action. These are

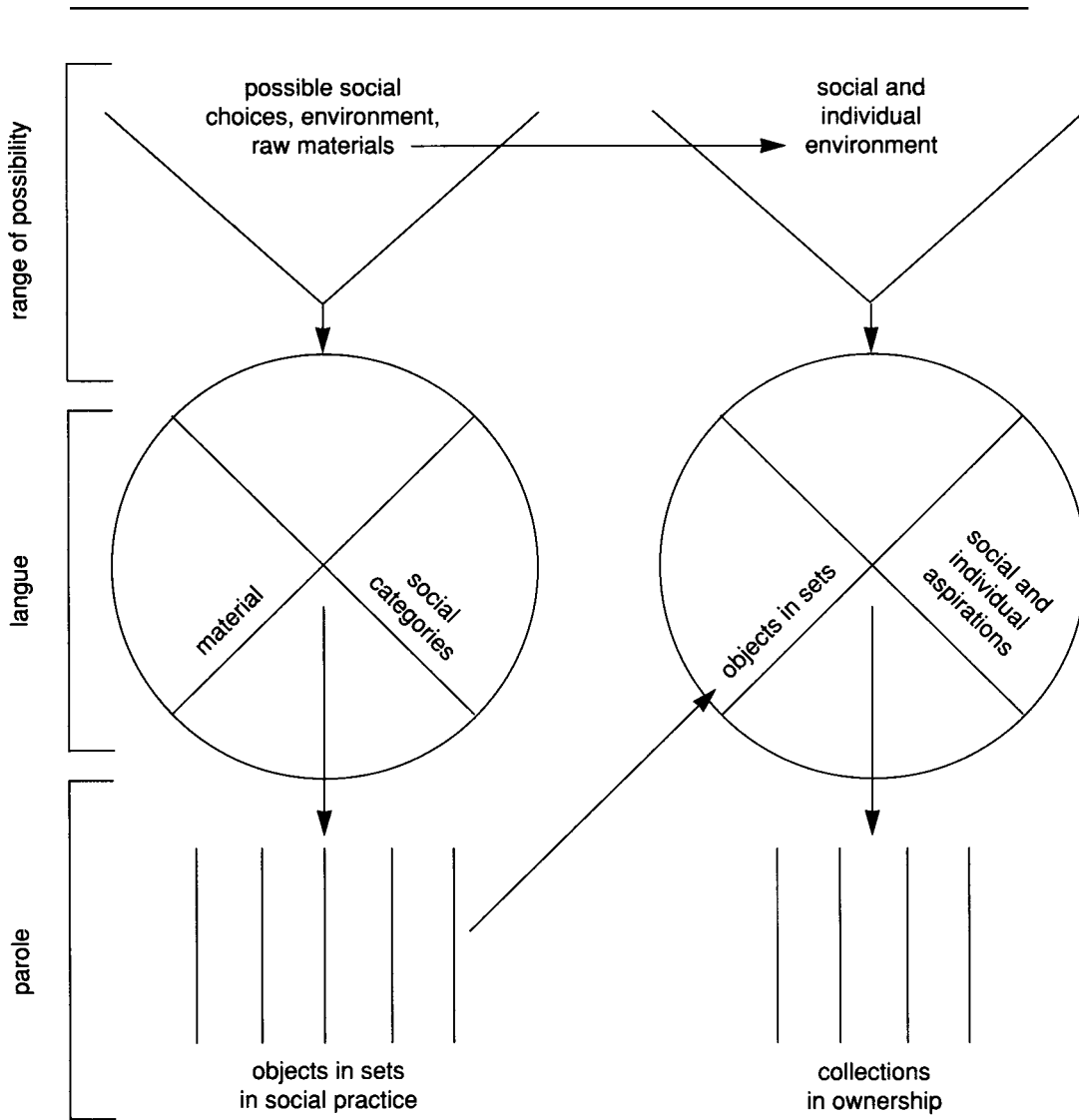


Fig. 0.1 Semiotic analysis of objects and collections

structured a second time against the cross-references of the individual collector, his (or her) history, psychological quirks and imaginative notions of value. In the *parole* of actual life arise the collections which result from these choices. These might be collections of pre-war fountain-pens of the great makes, Swan, Waterman's, Conway Stewart, complete with their gold nibs; they might be pens used by famous people on famous occasions; they might be biros collected by the owner on trips abroad. People normally make the very clear distinction between the two kinds of accumulation which the diagram reflects.

A moment's thought shows that a range of collecting processes is brought within the embrace of this scheme. Collections may be the result of large sums spent in the salerooms, or carefully calculated excavation campaigns, or well-designed fieldwork across the social sciences. They may equally be the results of forays into car-boot sales or genteel gift-shops.

A second thought shows up a range of issues which it would be inappropriate for me to discuss in detail in an Introduction to the writings of others. Social class has a bearing on the collection process, and so does gender. Notions of what creates value are very complex and so are the related processes of social change and the relationship of the material world to these movements. Our relationship to the accumulation of objects is as profound and as significant as our relationships to each other, to language, and to time and space, and as complex.

In each of the two Parts, the same principles have guided the choice of material, and the arrangement of the pieces follows the same pattern. First comes a general statement which offers a perspective of the material under discussion; both extracts quote some of the widely discussed definitions of, respectively, material culture and collections. In Part I: 'Interpreting objects' this is followed by the very brief but extremely significant piece from Hodder in which he distinguishes between the historical, functional (or technomic or sociotechnic) and symbolic, or structuralist, aspects of the meanings of objects. Part I continues with three papers representing various aspects of the historical approach to the understanding of objects. Miller gives us an insight into the historical development of the study of material culture. Pearce's paper on the Waterloo jacket discusses the accretion of historical meaning in semiotic terms, and suggests how our engagement with objects helps to create a diversity of meanings. The study of New England gravestones by Deetz and Dethlefsen shows how objects can carry historical meaning which is unique to themselves, and which complements that contained in documents. The brief piece from Pearce puts our relationship to objects within a behavioural framework in order to show how individual responses develop and help to create social change.

These are followed by three pieces devoted to illuminating the functionalist (or materialist or utilitarian) aspect of objects. The extract from Leach's book is a classic statement of the functionalist position, and Clarke's discussion, although now twenty-five years old, is an equally classic dissection of the functionalist working of material culture in social patterning. Hodder presents a critique of the functionalist position. The next two papers pursue the nature of objects in their symbolic guise. Leach gives a brilliantly imaginative and impressionistic account of how structuralist thinking can work, and this is followed by McGhee's analysis of the symbolic relationships embedded within Central Inuit material culture and other aspects of Inuit life.

As Tilley's paper makes clear, however, all meaning, of whatever kind, is a matter not of objective fact, but of social construction, the ideological basis of which can be unravelled, or 'deconstructed'. An important part of this ideology is the way in which objects, commodities, or objects in their marketable aspect interweave with the political ways in which value is ascribed to individual pieces: Appadurai's contribution gives us an important insight into this web of relationships. The nature of fakes, analysed by Jones, is one aspect of this, and an important one for museum material. The acquisition and interpretation of material from the 'Other', that is from those parts of the world whose traditions are now western but which the western world has appropriated, has its own world of politics, as Ames shows. In a not dissimilar way, we all appropriate the 'other' which comes to us as material from the past, or as pastiches of it: 'craftwork' has its own political dimension, as Shanks shows us.

Part I concludes with a group of papers concerned with the methodology of study. Those by Elliot, Pearce, Prown and Batchelor describe particular approaches to the organization of the study of individual objects, and offer research procedures, or models for object studies. All of these spring from the perspectives of particular disciplines, and those of

Elliot, Pearce and Prown, in particular, arose from work carried out in relation to post-graduate seminars in museum studies. Each of these models, in its different way, starts by framing particular steps in which data about each object can be gathered by the normal procedure of description, historical research, scientific dating and characterization, analysis of technological and manufacturing techniques, and so on. Similarly, each places within its procedures the need to compare the piece under examination with others of its kind. Each provides scope, usually towards the end of the process, for discussion based upon the appreciation of the object from the historical, behavioural functionalist, symbolic-structuralist and political perspectives already discussed. Each should be regarded as a guide, not a set of rules. The piece from Csikszentmihalyi and Halton is taken from their pioneering study of the ways in which people regard their own material possessions, and shows how a questionnaire and related definitions can be devised as the core of a research enquiry. All five of these pieces should be regarded as describing the application of material culture theory to actual objects, within both a museum and a broader social context.

After its introductory piece on definitions Part II: 'Interpreting collections', is given a similar tripartite structure, the elements of which consider the historical process of collecting, its relation to individual psychology, and collecting as part of the politics of value. The historical practice of collecting in the western, or European, tradition is represented by the extract from Pomian's book and the paper by Schultz. This is an area where material has had to be kept to a minimum, and much fascinating and important material relating to early European practices, and Renaissance and modern collecting, has had, perforce, to be omitted. Pomian takes a broad view of the social practices which relate to collecting, and Schultz analyses the key moment in the history of collecting when modernist practices gather momentum. This is followed by Goswamy's paper, which serves to remind us that cultures outside the West also have their own traditions of connoisseurship and collecting.

The next group of papers, by Pearce, Baekeland, Danet and Katriel, and Belk and Wallendorf consider the ways in which collecting is used to structure individual identity in relation to a sense of temporal and spatial ordering, to relationships with others, and to the construction of genders. The pieces from Stewart's significant book link up with these internal parameters but carry the investigation over into the world of ideology and social action. The same political motifs appear in the arguments mounted by Clifford in the essay 'Collecting ourselves'. The same note is struck in Thompson's investigation into ideas of 'rubbish' and 'value'. In similar vein, but for a broadly Marxist standpoint, Duncan discusses the relationship of collected material in museums, particular art material, to notions of 'good citizenship' and the modern state. A very different view of the relationship between collecting and museum display is offered by the People's Show Project, started by Peter Jenkinson at Walsall Museum, England, in 1991. This encouraged local collectors to display their own material in the museum and Mullen presents an account of the enterprise.

Finally, as in Part I, there is a group of papers concerned with the methodology of collection study. The Leicester Contemporary Collecting Project questionnaire was used in 1993-4 in the investigation into contemporary collecting in Britain carried out by Pearce and Wheeler. Joy describes some of the implications of the Odyssey Project (University of Utah), and Belk's paper presents some of the associated fieldwork and its significance. Finally, Formanek's paper describes a research project carried out in New York on contemporary collecting practice. Taken together, these papers point the way towards further investigations in the area.

The choice of papers has been extremely difficult, and much interesting material has had to be omitted. I have tried to include pieces not only representative of all the main trains of thought, but also of all the main practitioners of material culture study, but nevertheless there are some exclusions which I regret. Some pieces are deliberately included in their entirety while others have been cut to the bare bones of their arguments, and this is, of course, particularly true of excerpts from single-author books. Similarly, decisions have had to be taken about the inclusion of endnotes and references or bibliographies: here a variety of solutions have been adopted as seems fit in each case. The papers gathered here offer, I hope and believe, a coherent account of the contemporary state of play in a relatively new but rapidly developing field of study. It is now time to let them speak for themselves.

Part I
Interpreting objects

Museum objects

Susan M. Pearce

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.

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