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Toward a Fusion of Art History and Material Culture Studies

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This essay traces the commonalities and divergences between the discipline of art history and contemporary interdisciplinary material culture studies in order to explain why the two have been so poorly integrated with each other, as well as to suggest that art-historical practices should play a greater role in the broader scholarly examination of the social lives of objects. Materiality has been a largely unnamed, implicit dimension of art historical inquiry for over a century, and the essay argues that its continual suppression has rendered art history difficult to conceptualize as material culture. The essay examines art history's transformation into visual culture and calls for it to instead assume the mantle of material culture. It does so by revisiting the ideas of Jules David Prown in order to advance an Aristotelian rather than Platonic conception of the discipline.

One of the great success stories of modern scholarship has been the proliferation of interdisciplinary material culture studies. Originally emerging out of the related fields of anthropology, sociology, and archaeology, inquiries into material culture began as an attempt to extract information from objects left by prehistoric and nonliterate cultures. Lacking textual records from such societies, scholars turned to their material artifacts—bowls, architectural remains, religious objects, tools—to reconstruct long-lost or otherwise inaccessible ways of life.[1] Originally such investigations were the purview of scholars interested in the distant past or in precapitalist societies, but recent years have seen the field broaden decisively. The influential community of material culture anthropologists based at University College London has applied the frameworks of material culture successfully to contemporary societies, showing how the field's investigative techniques can shed light on the phenomenon of globalized, late-capitalist consumerism. The immense success of this project is clear from the thriving publications, conferences, blogs, and journals that disseminate the scholarship, and there seems little to hold back material culture studies from growing and developing further in the future.[2]

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Today material culture studies resists simple disciplinary classification; it exists instead as an interdisciplinary space within and among multiple academic categories, transcending even the larger academic division between the humanities and the social sciences. One recent book, written by an archaeologist, describes material culture's terrain as encompassing archaeology, cognitive science, psychology, sociology, anthropology, and history.[3] Most publications include similar lists, which contain various other scholarly areas, like folklore studies, as well as more specific subdisciplinary categorizations, like cultural anthropology or historical sociology. Material culture studies is likewise theoretically diverse, drawing from classical social theory, consumer research, psychoanalytic theory, subcultural theory, and social performance theory, to name just a few, in order to formulate diverse hypotheses about objects.[4] The result is a true transdiscipline in which a great diversity of objects, paired with a wide selection of interpretive modes, results in seemingly limitless potential for understanding things and what they might mean or have meant for different communities and individuals in specific settings.

As an art historian fascinated by objects, and one who has long claimed an interest in material culture, I have been struck by the degree to which art historians have been absent from the material culture discussion. None of the major publications commonly used as benchmarks for material culture studies come from the discipline of art history, art-historical texts are rarely anthologized in compendiums of sources about material culture, and in general art historians have been involved only minimally in the entire scholarly venture.[5] This situation contrasts strikingly with the perception within art history; indeed, many art historians believe themselves to be involved with material culture, use the term "material culture" frequently to describe certain classes of objects, and construct histories of objects quite consonant with the general claims and interests of anthropologically and sociologically derived material culture studies.

Why then the disconnect? It appears that a series of cross-disciplinary misunderstandings have made it difficult for art history to become integrated into the larger project of material culture studies; likewise, there has been a mistaken assumption within art history that its status as material culture is a fait accompli. The situation is made all the more confusing by the flexibility of the term "material culture," which is useful for describing a wide swath of interests and practices, as well as objects. In this essay I explore the commonalities and divergences between art history and a broadly defined interdisciplinary material culture in order to explain why the two have been so poorly aligned, as well as to suggest that art-historical practices and perspectives should play an essential role in future examinations of objects' social lives. Materiality, I further argue, has been an implicit dimension of art-historical inquiry for more than a century, one that has suffered at the expense of other artistic qualities. Art history has tended to suppress its status as material culture even as it has flirted continuously with materiality, and this has evolved into a serious intellectual limitation. The prestige recently accorded to dematerializing approaches to art, which have resulted in a diminished concern for materiality in general, has only exacerbated the situation. Moreover, I make the case for viewing material culture not as a methodology but rather as a meta-methodology, an ontological awareness

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that can inflect many critical techniques used to explain objects of all kinds. I also propose that the scholarly project of material culture has potentially valuable things to gain from some traditional concerns of art history, but that these paradoxically may have little to do with "art" as a category of human manufacture. Rather, art history can form a model for examining the materiality of diverse sorts of objects well beyond the category of high art.

By way of clarification, it will help to discuss up front the characterization of art history presented here. The discipline's boundaries are notoriously difficult to demarcate, as art history has long propagated diverse practices to study a wide range of subjects. Some art historians are already doing exactly the kind of scholarship advocated below, and certainly the many museum curators involved in intensive examinations of objects hardly need to be reminded of materiality's importance. Nonetheless, for all its diversity, art history has tended to turn down the same paths recurrently. For every individual scholar who engages with materiality, there are dozens whose scholarship does nothing of the kind. My argument seeks less to offer a precise description of art-historical practice than to isolate what might be called its disciplinary proclivities. I also recognize that certain subfields within art history have embraced material culture perspectives eagerly. Historians of ancient and medieval art in particular have for decades probed objects that fall well outside commonplace definitions of art, as have scholars interested in non-Western societies, and they have long posited medium as a fundamental component of meaning. That said, the disciplinary contours presented here will surely be familiar to many, since I've tried to emphasize dominant tendencies, ones still in place despite individual scholarship that might diverge from them.

Art History's Material Culture

Let's begin by pointing out that art historians use the term "material culture" in a way not quite identical to its common usage in anthropological and sociological literature. Often art historians employ the term to describe objects traditionally understood as the "decorative arts" or, to resurrect archaic language, the "minor arts." These encompass a wide array of semi- or quasi-functional products, including furniture, ceramics, metalwork, and carved woods.[6] Art historians classify material culture this way to distinguish certain manufactured items from the traditionally exalted "high arts" of painting, sculpture, and architecture. Explicit in this formulation is an ancient yet persistent distinction between art, appreciated for purely aesthetic and principally visual qualities, and objects, which may possess aesthetic appeal but which also carry some more mundane, functional significance. These classifications are often diffuse and inconsistently applied: what one scholar views as art may not be defined as such by another, and many objects are difficult to place definitively on one side of the divide. Indeed, much recent art-historical inquiry has sought to undermine or muddle the distinction between "high" and "low" art, rendering the art-craft divide weaker today than at any point in the past century. A Sèvres porcelain bowl, for example, is both art and utensil, or at least carries the capacity to be both, and many art historians have sought to show how a simple art-craft dichotomy is too

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crude for understanding such an object. Another approach to this problem is to reinforce and retheorize craft as a component of artistic knowledge, to reinsert the making of an object into its interpretation, a process exemplified in recent writings by Glenn Adamson and one that parallels the process-driven practice of many contemporary artists.[7]

In general, material culture when defined this way denotes an entire category of objects that are close to art, and may encompass characteristics associated with art, but that do not fully assume art's unadulterated status. This statement may seem surprising, since museums are filled with decorative arts that receive consistent scholarly appreciation, but the distinction persists, often subliminally, in the way art historians talk about their material. The art-craft hierarchy places painting and monumental sculpture at the apex of art-historical classification, with other sorts of creations viewed as less intrinsically meaningful. Few art historians would disagree that Picasso's *Les demoiselles d'Avignon* (1907) is a storehouse of rich, profound cultural meanings that can be excavated and developed almost infinitely, meanings associated not only with its maker but also with its promotion by curators and critics as the triumphant beginning of a modern art narrative that is still under way. Those same art historians, however, might struggle to assign similar semantic complexity to a mass-produced pewter spoon from 1907, although such an object undeniably had cultural value—in fact, because of its status as an everyday object, its value was probably more widespread and fundamental than the painting's.

The long-held belief that certain classes of objects are somehow intrinsically more worthy of close analysis has prevented academic art history from accepting fully into its ranks objects like our hypothetical spoon. The spoon, the art historian can claim, is not art. Yet it shares many qualities with art: it was designed, it has aesthetic value, it relates to other visual and material decorative schemes, and it can be viewed in museums today precisely for these reasons. Nonetheless, the spoon is more likely to be relegated to "design history" or "industrial design" and therefore again differentiated from art in its purest sense. That this pewter spoon could be excluded from art history says much about how the discipline clings to older categorical distinctions even as it attempts to rethink them. Further evidence can be found in any of the major surveys of art-historical methodology, which privilege those approaches that work best for painting and sculpture and overlook or underplay those that force the interpreter to assess art as an object.[8] Art history has the potential to be a discipline of objects, but its predilection for high art stands in the way.

Another sense of material culture, particularly prominent in U.K.-based scholarship, overlaps with the larger concerns of historical materialism, which in art-historical discourse has meant a Marxist (or Marxist-inspired) history of art interested in the economic and therefore material conditions from which art is produced. Indeed, for many art historians the term "material" evokes this scholarly perspective immediately and not necessarily the physical nature of things, for which they would employ the older term "medium." One of the hindrances art history has faced in confronting interdisciplinary material culture is that the distinction between material culture and materialism has been tough

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to explain. A materialist view of culture is a class-sensitive exploration of it, an attempt to understand culture as based in the material economic conditions of its producing society. And here the methodologies of art history do abut those of modern material culture studies, since both recognize an economic basis for the exchange, enjoyment, and utility of objects in society.[9]

Such an interconnection has troubled art history, however, since materialism so understood may seem to characterize the art object as a commodity, a turn that many art historians have resisted making even as others have embraced it. There is still tension in art-historical writing about whether viewing art as a commodified object provides the most valuable explanations. In 1998, for example, Gen Doy published an entire book titled *Materializing Art History*, which called for reasserting art history's connections to Marxist thought and to the social history of art.[10] This clearly demonstrates that art history's status as a materialist inquiry is not uniformly accepted. All art is made either on commission from a patron, or on speculation by a professional artist seeking income, or by amateurs who do not expect to sell their wares, or by people who require it to serve some sort of social or psychological need, and in all of these scenarios art exists within settings in which goods are exchanged in order to enable its existence. Art-historical studies often acknowledge these conditions, but there is no methodological requirement that they do so, and many don't. Indeed, there is a long tradition within art history that views such concerns as essentially extrinsic to art's transcendental powers, as well as modern methodological perspectives that view art's material circumstances as a narrow aspect of its larger potential significance. Not everyone wants to wipe away art's mysterious sheen, as John Berger recommended nearly forty years ago.[11]

Finally, I come to the way in which art history most closely approaches broader interdisciplinary material culture studies—namely, the study of collecting. This perspective takes into account not necessarily the interpretation of an art object per se, but the interpretation of its acquisition, which may include its display, its sale, its transfer from one institutional party to another, and, broadly defined, its social accessibility. There is a healthy and still growing interest in the history of patronage and collecting within art history, a perspective that emerges from the social history of art but today exists somewhat independently of it. Here art is a good, a thing purchased and consumed like any other object, but a special and privileged kind of good. This area of study can include investigations of provenance and ownership, and therefore can encompass the entire histories of museums and museum studies. Publications on these topics have experienced exponential growth in recent years, and their strength has been to show that a work of art's potential meanings are determined to some degree by the contexts in which it is seen and experienced. Jan van Eyck's *Arnolfini Portrait* possessed a potential set of meanings for its original viewers in fifteenth-century Bruges, not least for the man long believed to be its patron, the Italian merchant Giovanni Arnolfini. It likely generated a different set of meanings after it entered the Spanish royal painting collection in Madrid, where Diego Velázquez saw it and probably used it as a model for his famous canvas of 1656, *Las meninas*. Its significance has been further altered through its current display at the National Gallery of Art in London, where it is viewed by thousands of visitors yearly in the

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context of a museum experience, its aura augmented and multiplied through printed and digital images accessible all over the planet. Mass reproduction on everything from coffee mugs to posters to refrigerator magnets likewise enables simulacra of the painting to be owned outside of the museum and thereby alters its significance yet further. Understanding art within the history of collecting and display enables the significance of practices such as these to be parsed out and art's meanings thereby understood as socially determined.

The weakness of this approach is that not all objects were amassed with the same avidity, and certain kinds of objects were not "collected" as much as simply made, purchased, and used. Therefore the history of collecting runs the risk of reifying art as a privileged category for study. We may turn to the Arnolfini portrait to understand fifteenth-century Bruges, but as a costly product requiring specialized creative skills and made for the needs and desires of a specific patron, the painting was and remains an exceptional thing. What it can tell us about the past is likewise probably exceptional and perhaps therefore limited in its applicability. We may learn from it, but we could also derive valuable knowledge by looking at a contemporary Flemish table or everyday dinnerware. By focusing on collecting as an elite pastime, the significance of these types of objects may become obscured and histories may be tilted toward the experiences of the privileged and wealthy. To forestall that, the history of collecting might seek to meld with what art historians call the history of material culture, to return to our first sense of the term, but at this point any such process is still in its infancy.[12] The history of object acquisition may therefore form a basis for imagining art history as a discipline of material culture.

Visual versus Material Culture

The terms just laid out probably seem surprising to some readers and entirely obvious to others, since the distinctions I've drawn rest on divergent understandings of disciplinary mission. To an outside reader, the notion that art history is somehow at odds with material culture surely seems patently false. Don't art historians study objects, typically ones housed in institutions that understand themselves as the storehouses of the past's material remains? To a reader operating within the discipline of art history, conversely, the points sketched out above might seem true but of secondary importance, since questions of materiality are less important, and therefore less well developed, than issues that enable the interpreter to explore art as part of larger historical processes of visuality. Yet this divergence is itself the signal of a larger problem, which we can begin to examine if we approach things from the art-historical perspective on art's materiality.

As I noted above, understanding an object within an art-historical disciplinary framework does not necessarily require the interpreter to engage with its materiality; at best, the work of art's materiality is telescoped into its medium, which typically is positioned as a predecessor to meaning. So much art-historical writing assumes this to be true that the major methodological frameworks used by art historians today offer relatively few carefully developed tools for

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highlighting art's material status. Materiality has rarely been formulated as an essential component of interpretation, and this is because art history has persistently privileged the visual aspects of art over the material, an orientation that can be traced back to some of the discipline's foundational thinkers. Heinrich Wölfflin's formalism stressed the comparative method as a means of exploring artistic style, but the actual materiality of the paintings so analyzed is only a minor part of his equation.[13] Erwin Panofsky's iconographical method, at least as promulgated in his popular essays published in the 1950s, likewise makes no strong demand on the interpreter to explore medium as a constituent of meaning.[14] This exploration may be part of the discussion, but there is no imperative to make it so and much iconographical writing produced in the wake of Panofsky's heyday pays little attention to it. This has had the result of privileging the idea or image over the object as a thing, and much art-historical writing continues to undervalue materiality as a component of its scholarly mission. Exacerbating this tendency is the pride of place given to painting, particularly easel painting, in the formation of art-historical canons and the conceptualization of larger interpretive methodologies. The two-dimensional image remains the focal point of the great majority of art-historical activity, and I think there remains a tacit presumption that painting is the privileged art-historical subject, certainly at least in studies of early-modern and modern art. Likewise the role of the two-dimensional image has become increasingly conspicuous in art-historical activity as the "domain of images" has become synonymous with what art historians are expected to understand.[15]

To some degree this prominence is the result of practical considerations. Two-dimensional images are at least superficially more straightforward to reproduce than sculpture, architecture, the decorative arts, and other kinds of objects, and pictorial illusionism is easier to study in the absence of the work of art itself. Wölfflin's two-slide comparative method, in which two works of art are displayed to students simultaneously in order to enable comparing and contrasting, operates best with the painted image. And one might take this observation further by noting that the interest in illusionism, in how a work of art dematerializes into a vision, has a privileged place both in Renaissance art theory and in various modern reformulations. Surveys of art-historical methodology likewise privilege representation as a fundamental precondition of art and therefore define the image as the ideal subject of art-historical inquiry.[16]

That hierarchization of the visual over the material has received an extra push through the advancement of visual culture as a transdisciplinary category of study, one involving art history but by no means limited to it. There is no real consensus on what "visual culture" is as a field of academic inquiry, and this has resulted in the term being used to describe a wide range of scholarly activities. One influential definition takes as its grounding the increased importance of the image in contemporary society as daily life is continually mediated, even created and experienced, through visuality.[17] The Internet, digital imagery, television, film, and now smartphones and other technologies seem to support the belief that we live in a postmodern virtual world in which the "real" is forever mediated through reproductions. Visual culture seeks to provide scholars with a set of analytical tools to account for and analyze the enormous role of visual-

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ity in our world. But visual culture has likewise been used to analyze historical processes, such as with Jonathan Crary's much-admired study of vision in the development of modern subjectivity, a book that delves into the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.[18] The term "visual culture" is now used to analyze artistic products from various past societies, and in some contexts the term replaces "art" or "art history" altogether.[19] This disciplinary shift has served to align art history with a number of academic areas viewed as worthwhile partners in an era of greater competition for limited scholarly resources: media studies; communication, film, and television studies; and the larger trans-field of postmodern cultural studies generally. Perhaps most crucially, it has served to link art-historical discourse with some of the priorities and procedures of contemporary art, particularly video and digital art.

There is no doubt that the proliferation of imagery in our world has created a realm of visuality in which seeing is more than just believing, but also to some degree being and experiencing, and visuality is an important process in all cultures, not just our twenty-first-century one. But art history's alignment with and partial transformation into visual culture has come at a price. By imagining the history of art as the history of vision, the danger that the image shall become detached from its material transmitter, and from the materialist contexts of its viewing, is great. Although the best visual culture scholarship avoids this pitfall, it remains an easy trap to slip into. It was recognized as far back as 1996, when the journal *October* published the results of its now infamous "Visual Culture Questionnaire" in which several art historians, most eloquently Carol Armstrong, expressed worry about the dematerialization of art.[20] As she wrote then, "The material dimension of objects is, in my view, at least potentially a site of resistance and recalcitrance, of the irreducibly particular, and of the subversively strange and pleasurable." Christopher Pinney has suggested that such worries are quaint and misguided, and references a series of art historians—Barbara Maria Stafford and Alexander Nemerov principally—whose work reasserts some kind of emphasis on imagery's materiality as an essential point.[21] Yet this emphasis remains weak amid the flood of art-historical writing that emphasizes visuality over materiality, and even Stafford's and Nemerov's techniques remain disparate from material culture as understood in anthropology or sociology.[22] Armstrong's worry that the materiality of art could be lost through visual culture is therefore a more prescient concern than it may have seemed in the 1990s, and the spate of work on visual culture since then suggests that her trepidations were not baseless.

Yet emphasis on visuality need not come about in opposition to materiality, and to some degree it is possible to imagine visual culture and material culture as interrelated aspects of the same scholarly project. Visuality and materiality tend to operate in tandem, actually, since we typically rely on more than one sense to apprehend something. Even the most detached, phantasmic postmodern product, the digital image that can be experienced virtually anywhere, still requires a material means of conveyance—a laptop, a phone—to be seen, and that material conduit remains an attractive and fundamental component of looking. The recent economic success of the iPad, a device that does what many previously issued technological inventions already do, but in a new package, supports

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this contention, since what has changed is the material setting for pleasurable image and information consumption. The dangers of overemphasizing visuality become even more apparent if we go back in time. A painting is not simply an image but also a thing, made of real materials and occupying finite time and space. The oft-vaunted reproducibility of art, which enables the *Mona Lisa* to be seen in art history classrooms all over the world, does not destroy the original's significance, as some readers of Walter Benjamin have proposed; rather, it draws more attention to the materiality of the original. Its materiality becomes fetishized precisely as its apparently "pure" visuality increases. Recent attempts to use digital technology to explore painterly materiality only emphasize this; one example is the extremely high-definition digital image of Leonardo da Vinci's *Last Supper* posted online in 2009.[23] The more spectral the image becomes, the more people obsess about its materiality.

I would take this line of thinking a step further to argue that art history has tricked itself into believing that it is a discipline of images, when really it has always been a discipline of objects. Some of these objects are bearers of images, some are harder to understand as such, but all are objects nonetheless. More crucially, that object status insistently inflects and determines a work of art's potential meanings, a fact that the best art history has always recognized. Recategorizing art history so that it is *not* focused around the image might seem like a misstep, but art-historical thinking has been flirting with this possibility for at least a century. Alois Riegl envisioned it when he distinguished purely optical qualities in art from haptic ones, and thereby defined artistic processes as existing along a continuum between seeing and touching.[24] Michael Baxandall touched on it as well when he argued that the material of German Renaissance sculpture, limewood, bore meanings that vivified the subjects carved out of it, that limewood was more than just a basis for conveying ideas but was itself an idea.[25] T. J. Clark saw it too when he argued that the outraged critical response to Édouard Manet's *Olympia* (1863) was triggered not just by its choice of subject matter or even its unorthodox technique but by the paint itself, which conveyed through its insistent materiality an untranscendent modern existence.[26] Michael Fried embraced it in his profoundly influential essay "Art and Objecthood," in which he claimed that 1960s minimalist art insists on its own thingness as a way of subverting aesthetic categories.[27]

Materiality has always been there, in other words, even in the writings of prominent and much-cited art historians, but it has never been the principal concept derived from their texts. Take the example of Baxandall. He is frequently credited with isolating the idea of a "period eye" for critical exploration, but he also propounded the idea of materiality as meaning, an aspect of his thinking that is acknowledged less often and that has been less influential.[28] Methodological publications reflect this suppression as well. The recently revised anthology *Critical Terms for Art History* contains essays on many aspects of art-historical thought, but out of thirty-one chapters, only two—"Commodity" and "Collecting/Museums"—foreground the issue of materiality in ways that suggest art as part of a larger material culture.[29] Nearly all of the other chapters focus on ideas, often in highly abstracted language, that present art less as a product of manufacture than as a concept. This state of affairs indicates, despite evidence

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to the contrary, that we still promote on a disciplinary level the Platonic idea as the consummation of art-historical practice and the image as privileged conveyor of this idea.[30] There may be disciplinary tensions undergirding this tendency as well—mainly, that foregrounding the idea exalts art history into a philosophical endeavor, whereas emphasizing matter renders the discipline subject to what could be called "the fear of the tchotchke." Dematerializing art history therefore forestalls the trinketization of art.

Prown's Material Culture

The above instances represent art history hinting at the aims and goals of material culture studies, but for various reasons not quite embracing it. There have been art historians, however, who have taken on material culture directly, and among them the most critically significant is Jules David Prown. Prown's essay "Mind in Matter: An Introduction to Material Culture Theory and Method," first published in a 1982 issue of *Winterthur Portfolio*, attempts to define a comprehensive theoretical and methodological approach for studying material culture, geared perhaps toward the museological context more than a purely academic one.[31] Curiously, although Prown's work has been widely cited and he is credited for promoting an interest in material culture particularly within the history of American art, his name is virtually unknown to modern practitioners of sociologically and anthropologically based material culture studies, a lacuna that is surprising given how early and directly he confronted the subject. Prown's essay first of all defines what material culture is about, its purview, and then also sketches out methodological issues involved in approaching it. He divides material culture into six categories:

1. Art, by which he means the expected categories of painting, sculpture, prints, drawings, and photography
2. Diversions, meaning toys, games, books, meals, and theatrical performances
3. Adornment, such as clothing, jewelry, hairstyles, cosmetics, and tattooing
4. Modifications of the landscape, including architecture, gardens, and town planning
5. Applied arts, such as furnishings and receptacles
6. Devices, broadly defined to include machines, vehicles, scientific instruments, musical instruments, and implements of all kinds[32]

One can see that this is a very broad definition of material culture, well beyond a simple assessment of "objects," and one that would include nearly all of art history and architectural history as well as several related disciplines. It is likewise considerably broader than any of the possible definitions of material culture with which I began this essay. Essentially it would be the history of everything

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manipulated by human manufacture to take on a willed appearance, and in this respect Prown resurrects Riegl's desire to see nonrepresentational objects and spaces become primary components of art-historical analysis.[33] What Prown believes links these diverse things is their ability to reveal aspects of past cultures, not textually, but through the inherent and attached values assigned to them at different moments in their histories. These values reveal a great deal about the past, and may do so in ways that other evidence does not disclose. Prown's methodology is therefore fundamentally historical in that he sees material culture studies as a tool for accessing lost cultural meanings. He also sketches out a methodological procedure for confronting objects. For Prown, there are three different modes of descriptive analysis: substantive analysis, which is an account of the object's physical dimensions, followed by content and formal analyses, or investigations of what an object represents (if it in fact does so) and of its form or configuration. The last of these, formal analysis, is of such significance that I shall return to it in detail at the end of this essay. After this descriptive level of engagement, Prown advocates a deductive level of inquiry that involves recognizing how objects engage with interpretive perceivers and highlights their physical dimensions through sensory qualities, intellectual responses, and emotional effects.[34] Prown acknowledges that our current sensual relationship to an old object is not absolutely equal to how that object was perceived by its past owners and users, but in crediting the sensual he inserts an important quality into material culture analysis that is often downplayed.[35] He then calls for informed speculation about the object based on one's knowledge of its cultural settings, but checked against its physicality and our sensory perception of it. These form a kind of critical checks-and-balances system in which intellect, sense, and description mutually support and counteract each other in a critical assessment.

Whether or not one endorses Prown's specific system for addressing objects, or views his art-historical approach as the best one for understanding material culture, his article remains the most comprehensive theoretical and methodological statement about material culture that the discipline has ever produced. And yet the influence of Prown's thought hasn't extended far beyond his immediate field of American art, perhaps because the latter half of his career coincided with the "theoretical turn" of art history and, more relevantly, with the rise of visual culture as an art-historical priority. It could likewise be that to some, embracing Prown's method would necessitate redefining art history too radically by reducing art to a subcategory within a much larger domain, and surely many art historians are loath to give toys and violins the same scrutiny they direct to Gauguin's paintings. Such a move would suggest that a painting by Gauguin is simply a thing that shares qualities with many other things and thereby would endanger some of the canvas's intellectual cachet. My suspicion is that moving art history toward Prown's material culture would render the discipline too humble for many art historians. Scholars draw from the object's aura as much as anyone, and decreasing that aura might snip the wires of scholarly pleasure. That said, perhaps it is time to revisit Prown's schema to see whether we can reintegrate and reassert the concerns he formulated back in the 1980s into art history's current methods.

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Art History as Material Culture

I should now like to turn to the question of how art history and material culture studies might move toward a more complete synthesis. Art history has much to learn from the interdisciplinary practices of material culture. One central revelation is the idea that art has a physical, sensual dimension, and not just a visual one. As demonstrated above, this knowledge has been present in art-historical thinking for a long time, but its implications have been explored only intermittently and in recent years often suppressed entirely. That physical dimension is an indissoluble component of art's capacity to mean. I would like to think that we could follow Armstrong's insights here in recognizing materiality as a potential site of resistance and finding that an object's materiality may prevent it from being interpreted too simplistically. The relation between materiality and language is complex and troubled; the object's potential to be described adequately in language is frequently imperfect, and some anthropological scholarship has suggested that the object always surpasses or exceeds our ability to describe it with words.[36] Prown recognized this too, and saw in language both a tool and a potentially misleading recategorization of an object's materiality that is always short of the mark. The object's material resistance therefore insists on objectness or concreteness as an essential component of its being. The English language expresses this concept clumsily, but German has a nearly ideal word for it: *Gegenständlichkeit*. The word's etymology offers a fascinating explication of this line of thinking. *Der Gegenstand* simply refers in modern usage to an object, but the word derives from the verb *entgegenstehen*, which means to conflict with or be opposed to something. In this typically Germanic wordplay, being an object therefore emerges out of difference and opposition. Recognizing the object's status as a thing requires admitting that it can never entirely be absorbed into one's consciousness, never become a pure idea—it remains forever external, always at odds and foreign, and insistently beyond the realm of pure comprehension. It is not us, and that is what makes it an object.[37]

By the same token, the broader project of material culture studies has something to learn from art history. Art-historical writing has a long tradition of thick visual analysis. In older times this would have been understood as formal analysis and focused around the classic quintet of line, color, shape, texture, and space. These can be refined considerably to include many subtle distinctions of form; line, for example, can be described through recourse to geometric qualities, contour, thickness, expressive gesture, and even emotional effect. More recently, purely formal analysis has developed into something richer—namely, a semiotically informed analysis of artistic signs. In it one is less concerned with form for its own sake than with form as constituent of social meanings, whether understood in Marxian, Peircean, or other terms. Signs can be straightforward depictions—painted or sculpted pictures of recognizable things—and, more critically for visual culture, can also be more abstractly formulated bearers of meaning. The design of virtually all consumed merchandise, of everything within the built and manufactured environment, is a component of its potential meanings. Design historians have long recognized this, of course, but contemporary material culture studies have acknowledged it only scantily and overall have underestimated the importance and weight of these formal or semiotic qualities

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in determining an object's social meanings. One notices this simply by observing how sparsely illustrated material culture publications tend to be and how few of them engage in close visual analyses of the objects whose significance they seek to elucidate. It is as if the visual design of objects is somehow a peripheral concern, a perspective that art-historical thought should immediately dispel.

If these formal and semantic qualities can be applied to art, then they can likewise be applied to objects of all kinds, and therefore specific formal and physico-semantic properties can become a site of meaning generation. And here we should recognize that art history's applicability extends well beyond what we today term "art"—that is, objects characterized by their aesthetic individuality. That largely Romantic definition of art is historically fairly new and largely Western in perspective; it has been challenged heartily by many art historians who see it as too limiting in defining what art-historical study can encompass. In many geographical and chronological arenas, such a definition of art doesn't exist, or exists inchoately, and yet we would recognize all sorts of made objects as bearers of complex meanings. Those meanings are partly determined by their design, and indeed we can apply art-historical techniques to them to unravel some of their significance. This is what Prown advocated in his essay, and art history as a whole has yet to realize the full potential of his insight.

Objects have a logic. By logic I mean a structural coherency that exists on two levels. One is material: how the raw stuffs were amassed, put together, combined, or otherwise altered to make a finished thing. Structural coherency can be a priori—that is, it can consist of physical elements in a material that remain present in the final product—or it can be operationally revealed. A wooden bowl, for example, gets part of its structural logic from the wood used to construct it, and some of its final qualities are inherent to the original material, like the wood's grain, density, and hardness. These qualities can also be altered through processes like carving and staining to achieve a final effect. That structural coherency is both practical and objective.

The second logic is semantic. The ways in which materials are combined or modified into things allocate to them meanings that are culturally determined, inflected by context, and mutable over time and space. The formal qualities of an object relate to each other in ways that suggest relationships, connections, and discrepancies. These may reveal unstated or otherwise suppressed beliefs or assumptions, and they may just as easily be in contradiction to a culture's hegemonic beliefs. There is no reason why an object must agree with its producing culture about important issues. Armstrong noted this, and it is implicit likewise in Prown's essay. The logic of the object might support the ideologies of the culture it came from, but it also might not. Indeed, those moments might be the ones where the object speaks most eloquently.

Out of the Cave, Once and for All

To conclude this essay, I'd like to travel to a perhaps surprising place: ancient Greece, the society that gave Western thought so many of its foundational ideas.

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Specifically I'd like to go to Plato's cave, presented in the famous allegory about our perception of the material world that the Greek philosopher included in his treatise on politics, *The Republic*. Our understanding of the world, Plato says, is like being in a cave. Humanity lives in darkness, chained facing a blank wall upon which shadows pass, silhouettes of objects illuminated by an unseen light. People take these shadows to be reality, but they are just reflections. The only person who can decipher them is the philosopher, who understands that these forms are not real, but rather illusions. This story emerges from Plato's theory of forms, in which "ideas" possess the highest status, trumping the mutable, discernible world that we know through our senses—in other words, the material world.

I'm certainly not the first to recognize that much art-historical scholarship takes this Platonic allegory as a model for its practice. Art historians have assumed a position analogous to Plato's philosopher. We look at images. We conceive of them as representations of other things, be they literal representations (a still life represents fruit and a bowl) or metaphorical ones (Mark Rothko's abstract paintings "represent" psychic turmoil and alienation). Images are spectral traces of some sort of reality. We recognize the illusion and ask for what reason it might exist. Images require deciphering, and the optical sensation of them—the way in which images operate in our eyes and mind—is the process whereby we locate their meanings. One might even make this observation more literal by claiming that art history's traditional teaching setup—a professor standing before students in a darkened room with a digital projector or slide machine transmitting images over their heads—is a beautifully close approximation of Plato's scene. We not only have institutionalized its architecture but have retained the dematerializing implications of Plato's metaphysics as well, since the spectral image is the route through which art-historical knowledge disseminates.

I have tried to suggest that this has been a perilous, even erroneous, model for art history. Plato's cave proves particularly unhelpful for conceiving of art history as material culture. Art history should, I propose, reclaim an Aristotelian path. I mean here the Aristotle of the *Metaphysics*, in which the philosopher conceives of the world not as traces of something else but as organized embodiments of matter and form.[38] His ideas about this began earlier, in his *Categories*, where he propounds a hylomorphic theory of form. Artistotle defines matter as the potentiality of something and form as its actuality, terms he sets forth as part of an explicit critique of Plato's thinking. All entities, natural and manufactured, require a triad of elements in order to exist. Matter is the raw materials out of which things are made, and importantly these need not be purely physical; an idea can be formed out of other thoughts, which make up its matter. Form is the specific potentiality of a substance or combination of substances, its "way of operating," in the sense of how that substance comes together in a specific instance. Matter and form are always present in things, and to constitute a thing, matter and form must assume a structure, an organizing principle, design, composition, or, as I termed it above, logic.[39] That structure relies on matter and form for its existence—all must be there for something to exist. Put together, substance is the structure of a compound of matter and form.

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There are great complexities in Aristotle's thought, and much room for modification and multilateral interpretation. Philosophers have wrestled with the implications for over two millennia, and I claim no authoritative or definitive interpretation of his ideas. But it seems to me that Aristotle offers us something valuable for conceiving of art history as material culture.[40] Art is not exclusively a representation of something else (although it can and often does represent), but is also a structured entity composed of matter and form. A construction must incorporate both matter and form in order to be. Already we are operating with a broader set of terms than the Platonic model permits, since the object doesn't in this model have to include a representation of anything. It may be simply a construction, not intended to suggest anything else; it may represent in all sorts of different ways; or it may represent in a singularly clear-cut way. All are easily possible when viewed as structured arrangements of matter. The Aristotelian example would have us locate meaning as always inclusive of the object's materiality. Matter and form are not substrates to meaning but inherent to it, and matter cannot be easily downplayed or excised from the equation. More difficult to comprehend, but perhaps more liberating still, is that the structure of an object can now become its cause, since the structure is what allows something to be what it is. Form is not a series of aesthetic choices a priori to an object's being; form makes it a thing in the first place. Form is therefore analogous to the idea, concept, or design of being.

If we follow Aristotle's lead, and trace his insights through Prown, Armstrong, and others who have viewed the materiality of objects as the rightful focus of art-historical study, then maybe we can finally close some of the gaps that currently exist between art history and material culture. On a final note, let me suggest that such a program will be beneficial to art history. In a world in which goods of all kinds play an enormous role in our lives, understanding art as material culture positions the discipline to become a site where the design of things can undergo close formal, constructional, and socio-semantic scrutiny. The academy requires that knowledge, and in reorienting art history to highlight it, art history's relevance to object studies of all kinds becomes clearer. It is a project that might finally help the discipline link to broader academic practices of which it should be a part and for which it can provide much useful thought.

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1 For which see Christopher Tilley et al., eds., *Handbook of Material Culture* (London: Sage, 2006), 1–3.

2 One might name here the *Journal of Material Culture*; the blog Material World (http://www.materialworldblog.com/); the varied activities of institutions like the Bard Graduate Center, New York, and the Winterthur Museum and Estate, Winterthur, Delaware; and the series on material culture produced by the University of Michigan Press, Harvard University Press, Ashgate, and Berg. Material culture has also increasingly attracted the attention of scholars from literary studies.

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3 Carl Knappett, *Thinking through Material Culture: An Interdisciplinary Perspective* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005), vii.
4 Ian Woodward, *Understanding Material Culture* (Los Angeles: Sage, 2007), 2–4.
5 For example, Tilley and colleagues' *Handbook of Material Culture* contains, out of over thirty summary essays, exactly one written by an art historian, Suzanne Preston Blier, a scholar whose work has been heavily influenced by anthropological perspectives on art. The visual culture essay in this volume was penned by a trained anthropologist, Christopher Pinney, who works in visual studies.
6 Studies of American art particularly employ this language, but it appears throughout art historical literature, especially when the art historian wishes to make connections to what is perceived to be "folk culture." For material culture as folk culture, see especially Henry Glassie, *Material Culture* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999).
7 Glenn Adamson, *Thinking through Craft* (Oxford: Berg, 2007). See also Howard Risatti, *A Theory of Craft: Function and Aesthetic Expression* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007), with additional bibliography.
8 A representative example is the fine overview of methodologies provided by Michael Hatt and Charlotte Klonk, *Art History: A Critical Introduction to Its Methods* (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 2006).
9 Here the anthropological literature has been more successful. See Christopher Pinney, "Things Happen: Or, from Which Moment Does That Object Come?" In *Materiality*, ed. Daniel Miller (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005), 256–72.
10 Gen Doy, *Materializing Art History* (Oxford: Berg, 1998).
11 John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (London: Penguin, 1972), 15–16.
12 A step in this direction is Dena Goodman and Kathryn Norberg, eds., *Furnishing the Eighteenth Century: What Furniture Can Tell Us about the European and American Past* (New York: Routledge, 2007).
13 Heinrich Wölfflin, *Principles of Art History* (New York: Dover, 1950).
14 Erwin Panofsky, *Meaning in the Visual Arts* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1955).
15 I borrow this phrase from James Elkins, *The Domain of Images* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1999).
16 One may note, for example, that Robert S. Nelson and Richard Shiff open their collection of essays on critical terms in art history with David Summers's exploration of representation. Nelson and Shiff, eds., *Critical Terms for Art History*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 3–19.
17 Nicholas Mirzoeff, *An Introduction to Visual Culture* (London: Routledge, 1999), 1–31.
18 Jonathan Crary, *Techniques of the Observer: On Vision and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1990).
19 For the sometimes confusing application of the terms "visual culture," "visual studies," and "cultural studies," see James Elkins, *Visual Studies: A Skeptical Introduction* (New York: Routledge, 2003), especially 1–7; and for an overview of the entire field and its development, see Margaret Ditkovitskaya, *Visual Culture: The Study of the Visual after the Cultural Turn* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2005).
20 "Visual Culture Questionnaire," *October* 77 (Summer 1996): 25–70. For Armstrong's response, see pp. 27–28. Positions close to Armstrong's appear in the answers of various other scholars, with a particularly harmonious statement from Thomas Crow on pp. 34–36. A more recent engagement with this issue that articulates a position similar to Armstrong's, but specifically concerning objects, is Mimi Hellman, "Object Lessons: French Decorative Art as a Model for Interdisciplinarity," in *The Interdisciplinary Century: Tensions and Convergences in Eighteenth-Century Art, History and Literature*, ed. Julia V. Douthwaite and Mary Vidal (Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 2005), 60–76.
21 Christopher Pinney, "Four Types of Visual Culture," in Tilley et al., *Handbook of Material Culture*, 137–38.
22 Stafford's scholarship has focused primarily on optical overlappings between art and science, a prime example of which is her *Body Criticism: Imaging the Unseen in Enlightenment Art and Medicine* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1991). Recently she has turned to questions of art history's relationship to cognitive science, as in *Echo Objects: The Cognitive Work of Images* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007). Her most sustained engagement with the materiality of imagery appeared in an exhibition she co-organized with Frances Terpak titled *Devices of Wonder: From the World in a Box to Images on a Screen* (Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute, 2001). Nemerov's close analysis of painted objects can be experienced in *The Body of Raphaelle Peale: Still Life and Selfhood, 1812–1824* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001). For a recent statement by Nemerov about his method, concentrating on issues of estrangement and intuition, see the "Interventions" discussion devoted to him in the *Art Bulletin* 88, no. 1 (March 2006), especially 65–68. Materiality, material culture, and related concepts play little role in Nemerov's discussion, although his approach has affinities with "thing theory," a movement in literary scholarship exemplified in Bill Brown, *A Sense of Things: The Object Matter of American Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003).
23 Viewable at http://www.haltadefinizione.com/magnifier.jsp?idopera=1&lingua=it (accessed April 20, 2011).
24 Alois Riegl, *Spätrömische Kunstindustrie*, reprint ed. (Vienna: Druck und Verlag der Österreichische Staatsdruckerei, 1927), 32–36. See also the discussions of these concepts in Margaret Olin, *Forms of Representation in Alois Riegl's Theory of Art* (University Park: Penn State University Press, 1992), 132–37;

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and Margaret Iversen and Alois Riegl, *Art History and Theory* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1993), 76–80.

25 Michael Baxandall, *The Limewood Sculptors of Renaissance Germany* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1980), 27–48.

26 T. J. Clark, *The Painting of Modern Life: Paris in the Art of Manet and His Followers* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984), 138–39.

27 Michael Fried, *Art and Objecthood: Essays and Reviews* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 148–72.

28 An important exception being Malcolm Baker, "Limewood, Chiromancy, and Narratives of Making: Writing about the Materials and Processes of Sculpture," *Art History* 21, no. 4 (December 1998): 498–530. For the "period eye," see Baxandall, *Painting and Experience in Fifteenth-Century Italy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1972), 29–40.

29 Paul Wood, "Commodity," 382–406; and Donald Preziosi, "Collecting/Museums," 407–18; both in Nelson and Shiff, *Critical Terms*.

30 For example, see Armstrong's answer to the "Visual Culture Questionnaire," 27.

31 Jules David Prown, "Mind in Matter: An Introduction to Material Culture Theory and Method," *Winterthur Portfolio* 71, no. 1 (Spring 1982): 1–19; later reprinted in his *Art as Evidence: Writings on Art and Material Culture* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2001), 69–95. Prown revisited these ideas in later writings and spurred a considerable scholarly discussion. At least two subsequent collections of essays advance a Prownian approach to objects: Steven Lubar and W. David Kingery, eds., *History from Things: Essays on Material Culture* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1993); and W. David Kingery, *Learning from Things: Method and Theory of Material Culture Studies* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1996).

32 Prown, "Mind in Matter," 3.

33 Iversen, *Alois Riegl*, 7–8.

34 Prown, "Mind in Matter," 8.

35 Prown, "Mind in Matter," 9.

36 Christopher Tilley, *Material Culture and Text: The Art of Ambiguity* (London: Routledge, 1991).

37 It is certainly possible, however, to theorize the human-object boundary as blurred or, as Knappett describes it, "fuzzy." Knappett, *Thinking through Material Culture*, 16.

38 Aristotle, *Metaphysics: Books Z and H*, translated with a commentary by David Bostock (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), 29–31, 236–47.

39 My "object logic" aligns somewhat with Knappett's concept of affordances, which he derived from the work of psychologist James Gibson. Knappett, *Thinking through Material Culture*, 44–47.

40 Wolfgang-Rainer Mann has even suggested that prior to Aristotle, there were no things, or better said, that "things did not show up *as* things," until Aristotle conceptualized them as such. Wolfgang-Rainer Mann, *The Discovery of Things: Aristotle's Categories and Their Context* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000), 4.

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