

“Living in a Material World: The Social Life of Objects”

FALL 2023

FRIDAY 10-12 TEMPLE BETH-EL

COORDINATOR: Donna Kerner

SEPTEMBER 15: Welcome and Introduction to the Course

Some Things Are Good To “Think”: Course Overview

Introductions; Review of Syllabus and Class Goals; Logistics (communication, course materials, Class format) and Sign up for Class Facilitations.

Initial Questions/Topics: How do humans classify objects? How do objects circulate? How are objects attached to memory? Can they have biographies?

Suggested Reading

1. “The Gift of the Magi” O. Henry (PDF)
2. “On Seeing England for the First Time” Jamaica Kincaid
<https://www.somersschools.org/cms/lib/NY01913963/Centricity/Domain/989/Kincaid%20On%20seeing%20England%20for%20the%20first%20time.pdf>
3. “Look at Your Fish” Samuel Scudder “https://www.thoughtco.com/look-at-your-fish-by-scudder1690049?utm_source=emailshare&utm_medium=social&utm_campaign=shareurlbuttons

SEPTEMBER 22 Born Free: ‘Found’ Objects in the Natural World

Organizing Questions: Why are some natural/landscape objects considered valuable? Why do some places become world heritage sites worthy of preservation? How do people attach meaning to objects in the natural world (what is the process)?

Suggested Reading

*Excerpt from Bruce Chatwin’s *Song Lines* (PDF) (Ch. 3. What is a Songline?)

Suggested Browsing

Heritage Sites

*<https://whc.unesco.org/en/criteria/>

*<https://www.nytimes.com/2023/08/07/us/politics/biden-grand-canyon-arizona-national-monument.html?searchResultPosition=1>

Landscape/Environmental Art

*<https://www.nytimes.com/2023/07/29/arts/design/beverly-buchanan-land-art-georgia.html?smid=nytcore-ios-share&referringSource=articleShare>

*<https://umfa.utah.edu/spiral-jetty>

*<http://www.stickwork.net/featured>

*<https://www.dezeen.com/2020/06/01/christo-jeanne-claude-seven-key-projects-installations-design/>

*<https://waterfire.org/about/barnaby-evans-artist/>

Guest speaker, Bruce Owens, Associate Professor Emeritus, Wheaton College,
World Heritage Sites in the Katmandu Valley, NEPAL

SEPTEMBER 29 Memorials: Statues, Monuments, Totem poles, and Tombstones

Organizing Questions: What is the relationship between memory and material things? Who decides what to memorialize and where? What is the difference between honoring the dead, honoring sacrifice, honoring the victims of disasters, honoring the life of an important individual who represents a key cultural/historical initiative, and “vanity” memorials?

What kinds of controversies surround public memorials? Are they meant to be everlasting?

Suggested Reading:

- West Point to remove Confederate memorials <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/12/24/us/west-point-confederate-symbols.html?searchResultPosition=5h>
- Controversy over the removal of confederate memorials/Arlington <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/07/07/opinion/confederate-graves-arlington-cemetery.html?searchResultPosition=5>
*<https://www.nytimes.com/2023/01/15/arts/design/martin-luther-king-jr-statue-boston-common.html?searchResultPosition=2>

***Suggested Listening:** Interview with Ty Siedule/Armed Forces Re-Naming Commission
<https://www.npr.org/podcasts/452538775/on-the-media> (Making History 8/4/23)

OCTOBER 6 Art Objects and Collections: Objects on Display

Organizing Questions: When does raw material become art and who decides? How does ‘time’ figure into the value of an art piece or collection? How much does the reputation of the artist or the previous owners complicate questions of value?

Suggested Reading

Guest Speaker: Tripp Evans, Professor of Art History, Wheaton College, preview of his upcoming book on collections in 4 historic houses in New England *The Importance of Being Furnished: Four Bachelors at Home*

Suggested Reading/Browsing:

- *A Messy Table: A Map of the World”
<https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2022/05/08/arts/design/dutch-still-life.html?searchResultPosition=1>
- “His Name Was Belizaire: A Rare Portrait of Enslaved Child Arrives at the Met”
<https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2023/08/14/video/belizaire-frey-children-portrait-met.html?searchResultPosition=1>

OCTOBER 13 Sacred Objects: Relics, Sanctified Things, and Fetishes

Organizing Questions: When do objects become endowed with spiritual power? What has to be done to transform them from everyday things into objects with supernatural power? Who does the transforming?

Suggested Reading:

Selection from Victor Turner *The Forest of Symbols* (PDF)

OCTOBER 22 NO CLASS

OCTOBER 27 Ordinary (Profane) Objects and Social Inequalities

Organizing Questions: Why do some objects have use value and also prestige value? How and why do they become markers of status and taste? Is this only a matter of price and branding? How universal is this process and how much does context matter?

How do cultural/ethnic/racial specificities matter in defining value?

Suggested Reading:

“Everyday Use,” by Alice Walker (PDF)

Suggested Viewing:

People Like Us: Social Class in America, a film by Louis Alvarez and Andrew Kolker

{available in Streaming Amazon Prime and other venues for inexpensive rental}

NOVEMBER 3 Heirlooms and Inalienable Things: What We Can’t (Won’t) Sell

Organizing Questions: What things are not for sale and why? What things get passed down as heirlooms? What is the difference between “gifting” such items and “loaning”? How might loans of such heirlooms enhance reputations and translate into monetary value? [Think: The Sackler Galleries]

Trobanders of Papua New Guinea

NOVEMBER 10 NO CLASS—VETERANS DAY OBSERVED

NOVEMBER 17 Objects Gone Crazy: Hoarding, Clutter, and Marie Kondo

Organizing Questions: Sometimes objects threaten to overtake our lives. Why is there one set of moral rules that govern people who possess collections of value and another set of rules for people who cannot throw anything away? How do we decide what to hold onto and why? How did an entire industry of organizers and writers emerge to enforce a minimalist aesthetic and why now?

Suggested Reading:

Ann Patchett “How to Practice: *The New Yorker* March 1 2021

Suggested Viewing

“Sparkling Joy with Marie Kondo” {Netflix} and or “The Gentle Art of Swedish Death Cleaning” (Peacock)

NOVEMBER 24 NO CLASS—THANKSGIVING DAY WEEK

DECEMBER 1 The Commodification of Value

Organizing Questions: How do things move from value to sale? In this wrap up class we’ll consider services such as E-Bay, auctions, estate sales, vintage stores etc.

I’ll facilitate the interactive discussion that covers the questions and responses from participants that we have pursued in the course and we’ll on a mapping exercise that documents what we’ve learned.