

Abstracts
Material Culture Emerging Scholars Symposium 2008

Panel 1

Sarah Jones, University of Delaware (Winterthur Program in American Material Culture): "A Grand and Ceaseless Thoroughfare": The Social and Cultural Experience of Shopping on Chestnut Street, Philadelphia, 1820-1860"

This paper analyzes the development of Chestnut Street into a shopping district, and the social and cultural experiences that ensued, providing a context in which to understand the consumption of objects in Philadelphia. The way in which people shopped, as well as the ways in which gender and class functioned in this environment are discussed. Ultimately, this paper complicates our understanding of the development of shopping in America, by arguing that by 1830, Chestnut Street had become a shopping destination, a mechanism of consumer culture that historians have argued did not begin to develop until the late nineteenth century.

Between 1820 and 1860 Chestnut Street became the most fashionable shopping district in Philadelphia. It was a space devoted primarily to shopping, but also included a variety of other enticements to the area, such as theatres and museums, that simultaneously helped to ensure the vitality of the shopping district and offered a larger social and cultural experience.

This paper argues that a strictly functional definition of shopping, "the act of visiting shops to examine or buy goods," proves too narrow a definition to fully understand the broader experience of shopping on Chestnut Street. Experiential shopping in public spaces, in which people interacted with goods that were not available for purchase from a particular establishment, such as a hotel, but *could* be purchased elsewhere, proved an important aspect of shopping on Chestnut Street.

This study of shopping in Philadelphia complicates prior assumptions regarding the development of consumer culture, demonstrating that many of the aspects that came to define the Victorian department store and modern shopping mall were not new. Rather, a number of these elements, and the social and cultural experience they provided, were already in place by the 1830s.

Sarah J. Chicone, Museum of the Earth, Ithaca, NY (Paleontological Research Institution): "Reimagining America's 'Deserving': Poverty, Materiality, and the 1913-14 Southern Colorado Coal Strike"

The typical American categorized as "poor" by the government has not only a refrigerator, a stove, and a washing machine, but also a car, home air conditioning, a microwave, a color TV, a VCR, and a stereo... [Rector, 2006]

This quotation from the conservative think tank The Heritage Foundation begs the question. . . . If they have all this stuff how can they be poor?

The implicit question and intended conclusions are not unique to The Heritage Foundation, but are routinely embedded within the rhetoric of social policy. The direct equation of poverty with materiality stems from a Western tradition that depicts poverty as a quantifiable "object" defined in terms of measurements. Inherent in this description is the idea that measurements are somehow based on a reality that exists outside of cultural constructions. This reality then is defined by its materiality visible within an individual or groups' possessions. Yes, poverty has very real material consequences, but to reduce poverty to a measurement of economically defined materiality neglects the ideological constructions that shape its production and use poverty as a tool to define the other within capitalist contexts.

This paper builds upon previous archeological inquiry moving past current western definitions that define poverty in terms of its measurements, beyond a direct comparison of material culture against historically established ideologies, and beyond the demonstration of socio-economic indicators based on a structural view of class. I draw on the events of the 1913-14 southern Colorado Coal strike, historical records, oral histories and archaeologically recovered materials to call into question reliance on solely materialist definitions of poverty and explore how materiality, even that which was involved in poverty's production was used to leverage social change in one of the bloodiest American labor struggles of the 20th century.

Martina Grünewald, University of Applied Arts, Vienna (Design History): "Inalienable Possessions of a Different Sort: On the Fading World of Pawnbroking in Vienna"

A hundred thousand pawns. One has hardly ever seen so many jackets, so many men's trousers, so many coats at once before. And—so many empty clothes hangers, in bunches, in clusters, in giant mountains, clothes hangers, clothes hangers... The attentive reader is right: of course the clothes hangers are not pawn items. They tell us only that people had less in the old times, when many more pieces of clothing were pawned. Today the electric appliances, the cameras, the technical household appliances have replaced the clothes. Felix Dorf, in the Viennese newspaper *Das kleine Blatt*, 1963

In a groundbreaking study on Oceanian gift economies the anthropologist Annette Weiner described how "inalienable possessions" principally crafted by women govern cultural reproduction in the Western Pacific. Carefully prepared banana leaf bundles, hair strings and feather cloaks are withheld from circulation or must be returned to the giver in order to preserve or even enlarge personal and collective entitlement to social, political, and economic power. Inspired by Weiner's findings, my doctoral work examines the "keeping-while-giving" of material artifacts in contemporary Vienna. However, instead of national museums or private collections, I investigate the cultural construction of value around the everyday objects a local community deposits at a privately-owned pawnshop in exchange for cash credit.

For centuries Viennese pawnshops readily accepted used tableware, pots and pans, carpets and furniture, musical instruments and jewelry as well as textiles and clothing as collateral. Not any longer. With the advent of mass consumerism, women's clothes were first to lose their creditworthiness and to be replaced by cameras, television sets, laundry machines and later personal computers and printers. Today, the countless empty clothes hangers commented on by the journalist Felix Dorf in a 1963 newspaper article are joined by rows of vacant shelves. Despite continued customer demand for short-term credit, pawnbrokers increasingly decline used goods as loan security because their low monetary value yields too little interest. As recent anthropological scholarship devoted to the study of informal trade in second-hand articles on flea markets, in vintage boutiques, and even online has shown used goods continue to resonate with social and personal value. But in a formal trading arena these objects have become a different sort of inalienable possession, one unfit for resale.

How can we interpret the recent loss of exchange value in used objects (especially compared to skyrocketing prices for pedigreed design classics in galleries and auction houses)? Considering Weiner's gendered politics of cultural reproduction I set out to answer this question by capturing the fading world of pawnbroking in Vienna through personal interviews, ethnographic fieldwork, original documents and photographic evidence.

Panel 2

Eric F. Gollanek, University of Delaware (Art History): "The World I Drank, or Empire in the Punch Bowl"

Empire follows Art, and not vice versa as Englishmen suppose.

- William Blake, annotation to Sir Joshua Reynolds, *Discourses* (ca. 1798-1809)

The destiny of nations depends on the manner wherein they take their food.

- Jean Brillat-Savarin, *Physiology of Taste* (1825)

What is the relation between empire and art? Contemporary theorists of empire and visual culture (Hardt and Negri; W. J. T. Mitchell; Nicholas Mirzoeff) have probed the role of images as a medium for "fighting fantasy wars by fantastic strategies" within global networks of hybrid groups. To push these ideas further, this paper examines the importance of drink in the formation of the British Empire in the eighteenth century. Material culture studies provides new insights into the role of artifacts in shaping desire and the collective imagination of the abstract workings of global traffic and political economy. Through analysis of the form and decoration of punch bowls, ingredients, and the visual culture of consuming punch, this paper explores the significance of drinking in forming communities through (literally) shared tastes and common interests.

The fluid state of the Atlantic as a body of water and area of study offers new ways of approaching consumption and exchange through the circum-Atlantic rituals of drink. Attributions of punch as East Indian in origin established its fashionable exoticism, reinforced through the common preference for drinking vessels of Chinese export porcelain

or ceramics decorated in the "Chinese taste." The ingredients of a single bowl of punch, whether rum from West Indian sugar cane or New England molasses, French brandy, East Indian arrack, or citrus fruit from the Caribbean islands or the Iberian peninsula, suggested a metaphorical drinking of the ocean itself. Bowls also provided spaces for lyricism and performance through inscriptions within the bowl and the social acts of toasting. In these ways, the punch bowl created a centripetal force drawing people and things together into a mix as heterogeneous as the drink itself, providing a model for imagining the British Empire in the eighteenth century and the role of taste and appetite in shaping networks of global exchange then and now.

Jennifer Ferng, Massachusetts Institute of Technology (History, Theory, & Criticism of Architecture and Art): "The Life of Stones: Geology, Aesthetics, and the Excavation of the Material World"

During the late Enlightenment and early Romantic periods in Britain and France, the problem of how causes were related to effects, which included contributions from David Hume, John Locke, and Immanuel Kant, changed intellectual and public attitudes towards physical matter. These same attitudes persisted well into the nineteenth century as evidenced by John Ruskin's *The Stones of Venice* (1851). The Enlightenment discourse surrounding causality directly influenced how geologists and artisans perceived the material world, impacting not only how the earth was studied—its mountains, volcanoes, and rocks – but also how natural things like stones and minerals were applied and theorized by architects and tradesmen. Geologists, architects, and artisans measured and redefined rock and soil deposits, building materials, and paste jewels, employing imperfect techniques, attempting to identify how external characteristics or behaviors were connected to unseen and in some cases, invisible causes that would provide clues to the internal composition of an object. This new materiality, as I suggest, was constructed upon subjective ideas about color, contour, shape, and volume, which occasionally coincided with but more often, contradicted empirical observations of an object's physical constitution.

As a modern discipline, geology employed various methods of causality to determine the age of the earth, and often the remnants of petrological phenomena were perceived as being the unequivocal key to discovering the earth's true causes of formation. This paper investigates the visual representations and theoretical connections between the works of French geologist Jean—Baptiste Léonce Élie de Beaumont and British critic John Ruskin in order to elucidate how the geological forms of mountains, valleys, and volcanoes became foundational templates for three—dimensional elements of architecture. In 1830, Élie de Beaumont, a heir to the legacy of Georges Cuvier and Alexandre Brongniart, published *Recherches sur Quelques—unes des Révolutions de la Surface du Globe*. Along with Armand Dufrenoy and François Brochant de Villiers, he helped assemble the first geological map of France; his Cartesian theory of pentagonal networks attempted to predict fault lines along the earth's surface, which eventually became a failure in practice. However, his contributions reflected geologists' interests in correlating visible forms of nature to historical patterns of the earth. Terrestrial features were understood not only as mere means to an end but also as dynamic, ongoing processes that changed over time. Almost twenty years later, Ruskin published *The Stones of Venice*, announcing a call for "artistic truth" in nature as echoed in his previous treatise, *The Seven Lamps of Architecture*. For Ruskin, lines of movement and force were likewise culled from mountain ranges and crystals, carefully selected as palpable models for design in art and architecture, so that such man—made works would accurately represent their original sources. These forms, as interpreted by both Élie de Beaumont and Ruskin, proposed a new scientific structure of nature that combined subjectivity with empiricism to determine the origins and purposes of the earth's objects.

Juliette Kristensen, Kingston University, London (History of Design): "A Crafty Woman's Touch: A Phenomenology of Embroidery, Piano Playing and Typing"

The successful infusion of mechanised writing into the body of the labour market through Remington and Company's Type Writer during the 1880s drew with it the bodies of women, who were the machines' primary operators. This paper analyses reasons and produces a framework for understanding why women's fingers were considered to be so adept at operating a typewriter keyboard, by tracing the history of women's work. Interweaving a history of women's labour and a phenomenological analysis of hands sewing, piano playing and operating a typewriter keyboard, this paper will demonstrate how needlework, piano music and type are ways in which information is made material and how this materialisation informed and was informed by ideological constructions of femininity.

Using the theory of information developed by N. Katherine Hayles' *How We Became Posthuman* in which she traces the replacement of presence and absence with that of pattern and randomness, this paper produces a history of women's hands in the labour market that demonstrates how both the absorption of type and women into the semiotic space of the office became possible.

This paper contributes to current issues in material culture in providing historical context for the relationship between bodies and technologies, specifically the body and contemporary writing technologies.

Panel 3

Lynley Herbert, University of Delaware (Art History): "Egyptian Appliqués: Sewing the Seeds of Cultural Revival"

This paper critically examines the modern practices of Egyptian appliqué, an art form that dates back to pharaonic Egypt but one that is largely misunderstood today. Although Egyptian appliqué panels are arguably consumer goods—easily acquired by tourists since the early twentieth-century—I contest the view that these works were initially merely cheap tourist pieces. I demonstrate how appliqué panels, traditionally employed to depict vegetal and geometric patterns in royal tents, underwent an important shift to pharaonic imagery in the mid 1920's, presumably coinciding the "Egyptomania" inspired by the discovery of King Tutankhamun's tomb. More than that, however, I suggest ways for thinking about what the panels represented for those making them.

By the time Tut's tomb was discovered in 1922, Egypt had declared its independence from British rule. Concurrently, Egyptians began to juxtapose modern and ancient imagery in works of art, literature, and architecture as signs of nationalistic pride. The switch to the inclusion of pharaonic imagery reflected a collective search for identity as the Egyptians struggled to free themselves from foreign dominance and reclaim their legacy. This was the dynamic and charged atmosphere in which these appliqué works were produced. In exploring the nationalistic symbolism with which Egyptians imbued their ancient past, and the care taken in creating these textiles, this paper investigates how those designing these

panels had to make important decisions as they developed their new visual repertoire, involving not only how they displayed their ancient past, but also their modern selves. These "tourist trinkets," then, may offer insights into the Egyptians' perceptions of themselves, their recognition of the Western desire to appropriate their culture, and their agency in shaping and controlling that consumption.

Hillary Kaell, Harvard University (American Studies): "Christian Teens and Biblezines: An Analysis of *Revolve: The Complete New Testament*

Revolve is a glossy, 400-page bible in "teen magazine" format. In 2003, when it was first released, it caused a sensation in both the evangelical and secular media. It proved extremely successful, selling over half a million copies in under six months. In the wake of *Revolve*, secular teen magazines, like *Cosmo Girl!* and *Seventeen*, have introduced "spirituality" sections.

Revolve is particularly interesting academically because it does not fit into either Colleen McDannell's analysis of the Christian teen magazine genre or Dawn Currie's understanding of how secular teen magazines function (McDannell is a leading U.S. scholar of Christian material culture; Currie is a Canadian sociologist). In part this is because of *Revolve's* unique physical format, which is both "utopian fantasy" (Currie, 1999: 258-9) and the inerrant, living word of God.

Broadly, my presentation is interested in how knowledge is produced and consumed, using *Revolve* as the jumping off point. First, I will focus on how *Revolve's* format communicates to evangelical teen girls what they are expected to be and to become. I will look at page layout, the use of photos and color and how Durkheim's sacred/profane categories are "scrambled", to use McDannell's term (McDannell, 1995:8). Second, I am interested in how *Revolve* communicates ideas about race and "whites out" differences between evangelicals. While this is an attempt to promote one "family in God" it often serves to exoticize the Other. Third, I will look at how *Revolve's* very format trains young evangelical women to both "filter" sacred and secular and to participate in a redemptive sin-confess-repent cycle that forms the basis of evangelical prayer life. Finally, I will look to Walter Benjamin's ideas of the authenticity ("aura") of reproduced objects and argue that his hypothesis does not hold with regard to *Revolve*. Its very reproducibility gives it power.

Rebecca Onion, University of Texas, Austin (American Studies): "Reclaiming the Machine: Steampunk Practice and the Humanization of the Technological Object"

The present-day subculture of self-identified "steampunk" tinkerers makes a political program out of an unbounded affection for what these modifiers see as the pure look of technology, before it was "corrupted" by twentieth-century modernist ideas of efficiency and specialization. This subculture was originally derived from a form of counterfactual science fiction that speculates, in its purest form, on the ways in which technology might have developed differently if Charles Babbage's "difference engine", or mechanical computer, had been successfully adopted in the Victorian era.

Most steampunk practice operates on the counter-cyber premise that every action a technological object makes should be visible and comprehensible by the human. (Or, as the

manifesto of the steampunk group Catastrophe Orchestra and Arts Collective puts it, "Steampunk machines are real, breathing, coughing, struggling, and rumbling parts of the world."* Thus, many steampunk objects are composed of brass moving gears and levers, recovering the spectacle of mechanical operation that, steampunks argue, is missing in the contemporary world, where technology has retreated inside overly efficiently engineered black boxes.

Steampunks take their cues from a range of novels and films, historical and contemporary, such as Jules Verne's *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea* (1870); HG Wells' *The Time Machine* (1895); William Gibson and Bruce Sterling's *The Difference Engine* (1991); Alan Moore's graphic series *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen* (1999-present); and Marc Caro and Jean-Pierre Jeunet's "The City of Lost Children" (1995). But unlike other science fiction fans, whose role-playing practices focus on narrative, steampunks who become invested in this subculture choose to make their own steampunk objects, often posting their results on the Web, discussing them in zines, or meeting at museums to look at old steam-driven technology and get ideas.

Questions I will explore in this paper will cross the borders of material culture studies, the history of technology, reception studies, and subcultural analysis. I will ask what it means when a group of people revives a historical aesthetic with the intent of radically re-shaping the look of the objects that populate their everyday lives. Does the steampunk affection for the Victorian era extend to an interest in the social and cultural worlds of the Victorians, which were, after all, intertwined with their material cultures? If steampunks make steampunk objects to play with the idea of technological change, what do they understand to be the social meaning of technology?

In order to explore these ideas, I will examine blogs, magazines, and fora maintained and published by participants in steampunk culture. I will carry out both literary analyses of the steampunks' written work, and object analyses using photographs of the objects they produce.

*Catastrophe Orchestra and Arts Collective, "What, Then, is Steampunk?" *Steampunk Magazine* #1: 4-5.