

Materiality and Immateriality: Is the concept of 'Intangible Heritage' useful for Material Culture Studies?

Date : February 15, 2007

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While material culture studies are based on the idea that 'materiality is an integral dimension of culture' (Tilley 2006: 1), the recent adoption of the Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage in October 2003 by the United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) has brought the concept of intangible heritage and subsequently, the notion of 'immateriality' into the spotlight. In this sense, an examination of the implications of employing the concept of intangible heritage in material culture studies could raise new challenges around the interaction between the material and the conceptual.

Rooted in Japanese and Korean understandings of cultural heritage, the concept of intangible heritage emerged on an international level in the 1990s within the operational grounds of UNESCO, as an alternative and complementary concept to the Eurocentric understanding of cultural heritage that was dominated by the ideas of monumentality and authenticity. According to the concept of intangible heritage, the primarily Western focus on the technical or aesthetic characteristics of artefacts as an expression of cultural heritage, often ignores the living and performed dimensions of cultural creation and transmission. Extending beyond the Cartesian dichotomy between mind and body and material and immaterial, the concept of intangible heritage focuses on the examination of artefacts and spaces as an expression of the practices, processes and representations that communities and individuals recognise as part of their cultural heritage. As a consequence, objects and places obtain meaning and significance through the values that are ascribed to them by the people that create and come in contact with them.

This shift in the international understanding of cultural heritage could signify a new way for understanding objects and spaces by focusing on the human element inherent in them. In this sense, the concept of intangible heritage invites anthropologists, archaeologists, cultural heritage and museum theorists to adopt holistic and humanistic perspectives when interpreting material culture.

Reference

Tilley, C. 2006. Introduction in Handbook of Material Culture Studies. London: Sage Publications

Related Websites

http://www.unesco.org/culture/ich_convention/index.php