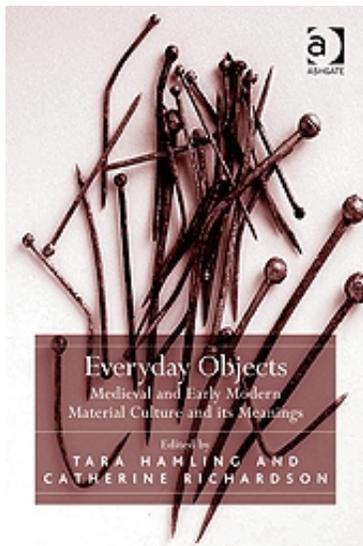


## Everyday, Pre-Modern Material Culture

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Review of Tara Hamling & Catherine Richardson (eds). 2010. *Everyday Objects: Medieval and Early Modern Material Culture and its Meanings*. Farnham: Ashgate Publishing. 376 pages. ISBN: 978-0-7546-6637-0 (hard cover).

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This collection of twenty-three essays represents an important step toward the further affirmation of material culture studies. It makes significant progress in developing this field's conceptual framework and equally advances specific areas of study within this field. It also has the potential to benefit other fields greatly and is a 'must read' for students of medieval and early-modern history and culture.

The volume makes a strong case for the materiality of everyday objects becoming a focal point in research on pre-modern culture. The essays emerged from a collaborative interdisciplinary initiative of "dialogue and discussion about everyday objects and medieval and early modern materiality" prior to and at the Everyday Objects conference, held at the University of Birmingham's Shakespeare Institute (summer 2007).

As stated in the introduction, "the impetus for that conference was a desire to discover the range of work currently being undertaken on medieval and early modern material culture across the humanities disciplines and beyond, and to see what might happen when archeologists, art historians, social and cultural historians, literary scholars, museum curators and conservators came together" to present their research (2). Indeed, this collection can be viewed as a successful attempt to further develop the field of material culture studies.

Among the most pressing needs faced by scholars in this area of research was the demand for a

multi-disciplinary methodological paradigm, which could offer "an integrated and well-rounded approach to the study of material culture," somewhat similar to what had been done within visual culture studies (10-11). While the latter field is concerned primarily with the visual, and not the material, aspects of objects, it can serve as a methodological template for material culture studies by the way of "helping to understand the operation of non-textual forms of communication and the nature of experience in the encounter between people and things", and offering a "particularly useful framework for understanding the meanings and associations" of artefacts in the context of specific periods and cultures (11-12).

The issue of method and theoretical approaches to materiality's study is raised in the essays of Part I. There appears to be a consensus among the authors that the methodological imperative of the field of material culture is to study the use of material objects as primary source materials, which, in turn, allows scholars to give voice to cultural, economic, and social facets of the history of everyday life. Emphasis has been put on the importance of a multi-disciplinary approach, the centrality of material objects to scholarly research, and the role those objects play in scholars' conceptualisations of the past. This theoretical framework secures the place of "history of material culture" next to the established fields of economic and political history and studies of kinship and gender (42).

Essays in Part II address the so-called "production approach" with authors focusing on the manufacture and functions of various objects during particular historical periods and by distinct social groups. The contributors demonstrate that recovered articles of clothing have the potential of providing insight into their production and consumption as well as into personal habits of the wearers. In one essay we find an example of how the use of particular terminology, personal names, and situations associated with distinct objects of material culture in contemporaneous literary pieces can elucidate the workforce movement in early-modern Europe, as well as on the effect this movement had upon the production and consumption of certain goods, and on that period's fashion. In yet another case study, we see how written treatises and inventories can be windows on the production of commodities, such as pottery, and on their consumption by people of different social standing.

The essays that form Part III of this collection explore the complex relationship between objects and spaces from an anthropological perspective (145). The principal argument here is that material culture is not about things in isolation or about written accounts of things, but that it encompasses the processes by which things and people interact. For example, archaeology, in conducting the micro-scale analysis of domestic and personal objects from individual households, allows for the reconstruction of the contemporary social environment with such elements as consumption, social competition, and tastes, to name just a few, whether in Europe or elsewhere (134). It provides confirmation and contradiction, color and texture to the cultural narrative, making it both more complete and more revealing (143). Another matter is early-modern portraits found in households which views portraits as objects serving multiple purposes - from personal self-fashioning and social legitimization - to identification of self and intimate appreciation by their owners.

Essays in Part IV demonstrate "how the study of material culture allows historians to assess the role of sound and sensory experience in religious practices and in the daily life of the household"

(19). The material expression of the "immaterial" in the form of surviving instruments and musical manuscripts must be studied with an eye on performance, the visual, aesthetic, and other properties of the objects as well as on those objects' cultural resonance (192). Similarly, studies of certain instruments, like bagpipes, uncover their complex place within the diverse social canvas of contemporaneous society, which bordered between approval and disapproval, propriety and non-propriety, as well as harmony, concordance, conformity, and their opposites.

In Part V essays explore "the way religion is expressed in material form" (20). Whether dealing with illustrated devotional sheets or other material religious objects and their functions, the authors pursue and develop a better understanding of the role material culture played in the spiritual life of people.

Essays featured in Part VI explore the nature of the relationship between materiality and identity, raising questions about various meanings of different material objects and types of material process. This is done particularly through exploring the sentimental and economic value that people place upon certain material objects. Ultimately, a reader is led to the conclusion that one's self is shaped in complex relation to objects that surround the self in everyday life, including household routine, social interaction, and cultural and religious experiences.

Among the important methodological accomplishments of this collection's essays, one clearly stands out: the disassociation between the complex concept of material culture (materiality) and the "simplistic" notion of an artefact. Material culture is hence described as "a network of homologous orders emerged as the powerful foundation for more or less everything that constitutes a given society" (8). Whether studying objects, interpretations, creation of materials objects, or human emotions associated with those objects, the authors contribute to understanding some of the most challenging, elusive aspects of everyday life for historians of medieval and early-modern societies. While these contributions certainly leave one wanting for even more facets of material culture to be illuminated, they may also be likened to important, previously missed pieces of a mosaic, which now make the overall picture more complete and more lucid.

Perhaps what is lacking is a clear emphasis upon the fact that all material objects analysed in this collection were purposely created and used by people according to their needs, aspirations, and ideas. The 'centrality of material objects' principle notwithstanding, those objects didn't just appear and go on to influence people's lives. Their emergence in shape and substance culminated from the processes of envisioning and fabrication and was followed by their use for various purposes, be those utilitarian, personal, ritual, or other. Nevertheless, such critical comments in no way undermine the exceptionally high scholarly value of the research in this collection.

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