

Art History and Material Culture Studies

Date : November 5, 2011

Why is there an apparent disconnect between art history anthropologically- and sociologically-derived material culture studies? 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 compendia of sources about material culture, and in general art historians have been involved only minimally in the entire scholarly venture. This situation contrasts strikingly with the perception within art history, where 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. In an recent article entitled "[Toward a Fusion of Art History and Material Culture Studies](#)" [West 86th: A Journal of Decorative Arts, Design History, and Material Culture 18, no. 2 (Fall-Winter 2011): 232-248], Michael Yonan argues that a series of cross-disciplinary misunderstandings are in place that have made it difficult for art history to become integrated into the larger project of material culture studies, and likewise a mistaken assumption within art history that its status as material culture is a fait accompli. Yonan explores 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, he argues, has been an implicit dimension of art historical inquiry for over 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 de-materializing approaches to art, which have resulted in a diminished concern for materiality in general, has only exacerbated the situation. Yonan makes the case for viewing material culture not as a methodology, but rather as a meta-methodology, an ontological awareness that can inflect many critical techniques used to explain objects of all kinds. He proposes that the scholarly project of material culture has potentially valuable things to gain as well 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.