Maritime Museums and Material Culture Studies[1]

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Material History and Watercraft Study

In its simplest form, a material culture approach is characterized by a belief that artifacts are important to historical study and are related to the people who produced them. While few would now dispute this basic idea, it is nonetheless useful to establish that what the adoption of such an approach emphasizes is the material. Moreover, a material historian would assume that each artifact has a history, a maker and a place of origin; was made from some material(s); was made in a specific way; looks the way it does as a consequence of intentional choices by its maker; and has an intended use or uses. It is further assumed that each of these factors generates social and historical meanings which are capable of recovery and worthy of study. These meanings are both inherent and accreted, made through both creation and use.

In earlier days, there was a sharply polemical edge to material culture study, as its proponents waged divisive and arbitrary battles with the rest of the historical community over whether texts or artifacts should have primacy in historical understanding. With its acceptance as a method of study and its adoption by the museum community as an important methodology, the rhetorical fires have cooled somewhat. Nonetheless, material culture-based approaches still tend towards explicit methodological structures and a schematic quality, owing in part to the movement's origins in anthropology and structuralism. This can be seen clearly in Robert Elliot's influential and oft-quoted article which grew from a graduate seminar that proposed, evaluated and revised various methods of approaching artifacts.[2]

One of the benefits of material culture methods and models is that they make explicit and formalize what are often idiosyncratic and intuitive research processes, and ensure that when a number of artifacts are under consideration the same questions are directed toward each. Although the model proposed by Elliot is by no means the only or the best in the field, it is useful in prompting the researcher to pose certain questions; in so doing it forces an evaluation, which is to some extent free from the researcher's preconceptions, of the artifact's intrinsic qualities (see table 1).

The Northern Mariner/Le Marin du nord, **IV, No. 2 (April 1994), 31-39.**

Figure 1: Souvenir Figurine of a Mariner.

Source: Private Collection.

Elliot's method seeks three kinds of data about a given artifact: observable data, determined through direct physical and sensory contact; comparative date, resulting from comparisons with similar things of a similar time and/or construction; and supplementary data, including written or printed sources, oral evidence, photographs, paintings, and drawings. These three classes of information move progressively further from the artifact, beginning with a restricted view and gradually re-establishing it in a broader context. The value of the material culture method derives mainly from the first two steps, which might otherwise be omitted, and which necessitate direct physical and personal contact with the artifact, precluding this use only of a photograph, illustration or written description.

These three kinds of evidence form the left-hand side of a table which is gradually completed as analysis proceeds (see table 1). Along the top are five categories of questions — material, construction, provenance, function and value — each answered in

turn through one of the three kinds of data. If the method is to produce useful results, a certain rigour in the application of the categories is required, together with a willingness to exclude supplementary and comparative data from the first phase of examination.

Table 1
The Material Culture Research Matrix

Data	Material	Construction	Function	Provenance	Value
Observable Data					
Comparative Data					
Supplementary Data					
Conclusions					

Source: Derived from Robert S. Elliot, "Research Report: Towards a Material Culture Methodology," *Material History Bulletin,* XIV (1985), 31-40.

When this method is presented to students, there is often a degree of skepticism about its utility, particularly when it comes to asking obvious questions, such as "what is it made of (for the purposes of demonstration, a ubiquitous classroom chair was selected as the first artifact). The obvious answer "wood" and the laughter that may follow gives way eventually to a more productive discussion as students realize that the enumeration of the basic properties and materials of even so common an item is a detailed task. This is particularly true when it comes to function, with its discussion of the artifact's intended job, how well it met the requirements, and the choices that might have affected its design.

Once this preliminary introduction is completed, students are introduced to a more specifically maritime application through a consideration of the role of historic small craft in maritime heritage preservation. The point has been made elsewhere that small watercraft (usually defined as those less than forty feet LOA) occupy a central role in maritime heritage.[3] Their small size, low capital and maintenance costs, and potential for interactive programming make them ideal for communicating maritime heritage, as a number of museums and related institutions have discovered.[4]

In order to make use of historic small craft, museums require accurate and detailed research. There is already a considerable literature relating to small craft history, a good deal of which has been written from a perspective outwardly similar to that of material culture studies, as can be seen in well-known works by Howard Chapelle, Kenneth and Helen Durant, John Gardner and Douglas Philips-Birt.[5] Students of watercraft have often employed the material historian's characteristic concerns for the material, construction, function, provenance and value of their objects of study. In

particular cases, they have also used this information to link the artifact to the society that produced it. Yet very little of the work to date has explicitly identified itself with the theories and methods of material culture, particularly in dealing with an entire boat rather than smaller maritime artifacts, such as tools and personal effects. Gregg Finley has focused discussion on a caulking mallet used by shipbuilders rather than the vessel it helped to build. Despite the fact that many significant watercraft collections are held in museums, where material culture methods are often utilized, the technique has not yet been applied to boats.

The principal technique of small craft research involves the taking of lines. To do this, the boat is set up plumb and level, and both its lines and construction details are systematically measured, the method used depending on the boat's size and position. Lines-taking involves a close focus on the actual fabric of the boat to determine how it was constructed. This examination can also reveal valuable details about why it might have been made and how it was used, including repairs and modifications during its life. In terms of the material culture paradigm, this corresponds to the first, or observable, data phase. A material culture approach is also particularly valuable for the second, or supplementary data phase, which builds on detailed structural observations to aid in understanding craftsmanship, workmanship and the material production process.[6]

After being introduced to the principles and practices of historic small craft preservation, students are asked to consider a boat from the material culture perspective, just as the chair was used earlier. It is immediately apparent that the boat was an infinitely more complex object, due in no small part to its use in a demanding and frequently hostile environment. By exploring the multiplicity of meanings inherent in a single small boat, students begin to see not only its rich potential as a source for maritime history but also the ways in which it could generate an understanding of that same past. Moreover, they can also see how such an approach can affect the view we receive of the past.

Professional historians are increasingly treating maritime history as less specialized, drawing ever-stronger parallels with shore-based industries, workers and patterns of capitalization, in the process breaking the traditional isolation of the maritime world, its ships and its workers. The public, however, seems to be moving in the opposite direction. We have just lived through a Columbus Quincentenary which saw the expenditure of millions of dollars on replicas of dubious interpretive and historic value while legitimate heritage vessels throughout the world are threatened with destruction. While we are literally awash in museums celebrating the maritime past, we are terribly short of those which analyze it in a meaningful way or which tap into the wide stream of professional maritime research and disseminate even a small portion of it to the public. It would appear that the romance of the sea is as popular as ever.

A material culture-based approach to maritime history would help to bridge this gap between professional understanding and popular perceptions. By focusing on the material structure of an artifact and its intellectual causes and consequences, it can change the "things" of maritime heritage from dutifully-polished museum pieces into objects that can contribute to our understanding of the maritime past. An analytic tool, it focuses on

the causes and effects of the artifacts and helps to avoid the enshrinement and valorization to which the museum process is so prone. Museums which pursue an understanding of the maritime world through its material culture will be better equipped to interpret for their visitors the full range of meanings inherent in their artifacts.

Material Culture, Maritime Museums and Popular Perceptions[7]

Material culture scholarship pertains to the history in the innumerable objects that humans have made, used and cherished through time. As one advocate has argued, "the artifact is as direct an expression, as true to the mind, as dear to the soul, as language, and, what is more, it bodies forth feelings, thoughts, and experiences elusive to language."[8] To the sceptic, this may be far from self-evident, yet whatever one considers their ultimate historical and cultural value to be, artifacts are undeniably the traditional stuff of museum collections and exhibits. It follows, then, that to appreciate the particular history preserved and presented in maritime museums, it is first necessary to comprehend the nature of the history inherent in artifacts.[9] Although the techniques and emphases may vary, the pursuit of such understanding is the fundamental *raison d'etre* of material culture studies.

What follows is a brief demonstration of the basic techniques of material culture analysis. The intention is to show what material culture analysis can reveal even when applied to a common, contemporary artifact. There are three questions to be answered in this analysis. First, how can material culture studies expand our notion of what artifacts are relevant to the collection or interpretation of history and society? Second, how does the museum-visiting public perceive its maritime past? Finally, how do objects of popular culture reflect the values and ideas of the society that consumes them?

The Artifact

The object under consideration is the small ten-centimetre figurine of a mariner depicted in figure 1. It may seem familiar, since similar figures can be found in the gift shops of many maritime museums. The sale of such souvenirs reflects the perception that they will appeal to visitors as an appropriate, if quaint, memory of an encounter with maritime heritage. The item is not, of course, offered for sale as a museum piece on a par with those celebrated within the galleries and stores of the museum. Nevertheless, such figures are indeed genuine artifacts and as such may also be subject to the kind of analysis used by students of material culture to interpret museum collections. The primary steps of material culture analysis involve an examination of the artifact with reference to the materials, construction, function, provenance and value.[10]

Material

The object is made entirely of a light wood (possibly balsa) with the exception of a small plastic pipe. Wood was chosen as the primary material both because it readily permits

carving (the technique by which the figure is formed) but also, no doubt, because wood, the traditional building material of ships, has a strong association with the sea. One might also extend this to suggest that an imported tropical wood (balsa) evokes what from a western perspective were historically the most distant (and romantic) trades in the south seas. The plastic pipe provides an obvious contrast in appearance and texture to the rest of the figure. In this respect, it detracts somewhat from the effect of the carved wood and stands out as a concession to overt, purely pragmatic concerns.

Construction

The figure is ten centimetres high, including the base, and is simple in both gesture and form. It depicts an elderly bearded male in a standing position, one hand in his pocket and one leg replaced by a wooden peg. This latter is strongly suggestive of the physical characteristics made famous by such nineteenth-century fictional characters as Long John Silver and Captain Ahab. The pipe is placed firmly in the corner of a closed mouth, which betrays no emotion but rather, along with the firm, determined posture and coal-black eyes, communicates an air of dignity, self-possession and careful, astute observation.

The object is carved, a fact clearly evident in its rather rough form. It is very likely worked by hand (one suspects quickly), which provides a satisfying and complementary impression of handicraft or maritime folk art. This effect is highly appropriate in an object intended to evoke historic associations. Nevertheless, the small plastic pipe, with its visible mould line, again serves as a reminder that this is a mass-produced item of twentieth-century manufacture, intended for broad distribution and sale.

The object is also painted, apparently by hand (again evoking folkloric associations), in a manner which, although rough, is clearly intended to convey character. For example, the figure has a white beard denoting age and experience; the ruddy complexion suggests a life spent outdoors; the black eyes produce a piercing stare. Reinforcing the seniority suggested by these traits are signs of status and rank, particularly the gold highlights on the jacket and hat. The gold anchor on the cap crest is generic, but serves to underscore further the notion that the figure's seniority has been achieved at sea.

The overall impression, then, is one of folk art (rough, wooden and hand-made, with strongly evocative marine characteristics) although the materials, finish, features and markings also betray its identity as an totem of mass-produced popular culture. Still, its rough, folkloric appearance invites comparison with the examples of decorative folk art often found in maritime museum collections.

Function

The item was clearly mass-produced for sale as a decorative souvenir. It is an inferior but effective and widely available piece which in material, construction and finish is strongly evocative of some of the most easily recognized and dearly held images of maritime culture. The evidence of mass production reveals a maker interested in profits from a

clearly targeted and well understood market. The owner is likely to be someone who finds romantic images of sailors and the sea appealing. It will also appeal to those of moderate means who enjoy the decorative charm and sensibility associated with folk art.

Provenance

The figure is of recent production (less than five years old). As there is evidence of hand-work, it no doubt is the product of a locale where labour is relatively cheap. In this respect, it may have been made in a place where the cultural references were prescribed rather than appreciated inherently. Nevertheless, this still necessitated (and the product itself reveals) a familiarity with these references. It may also have been manufactured in stages with various individuals responsible for different aspects of production. In this case, we know that the figurine was received from a child as a gift and is used as a desk ornament. The owner, a middle-class executive who enjoys sailing, displays it in the spirit of enthusiasm for things maritime which ownership and command of a private yacht has brought.

Value

The value of the figure is largely sentimental — first because it was the gift of a young son to his father and second, because it evokes a romantic, historic association with the sea. As a gift from a boy, it speaks of the common limits of a middle-class child's disposable income. Yet its selection and presentation as a gift, and subsequent semi-public display, strongly suggests that, whatever its limitations in size or quality, the figure reflects an image of maritime culture which is to some extent shared by both child and father. More important, it can be argued that it indicates a set of ideas and associations which say a great deal about the popular view of maritime heritage. This is the image of the mariner as a mysterious, worldly loner: a figure of experience and authority stemming from an almost mystical association with the sea, a man whose demeanour and physical presence speak of struggle with the elements. To borrow a word from Alan Gowans, it is a small "reservoir" of the cultural images and ideas which influence our vision and appreciation of maritime history.[11]

Conclusion

From even this short analysis it should be apparent that this commonplace souvenir reveals something about the popular images that inform our perception of maritime heritage. By carefully examining objects, however humble, and thinking about their context, we can obtain a clearer impression of how the products of popular culture reflect the values and ideas of society. Clearly this piece was made with reference to a set of popular (perhaps clichéd) ideas and associations and is meant to appeal to them.

Still, it is highly unlikely that such a piece will be found in a museum gallery, an observation that raises some interesting questions. For example, is the absence of such figurines from museum display cases due simply to the fact that they are clearly trivial, inappropriate or insignificant? Do they tell us nothing of importance about ourselves or our relationship with the maritime past? Or is the cause of this exclusion to be found in assumptions which govern the perception and presentation of museum collections? Ultimately, what we preserve from our past depends on the myriad of values by which we determine what is significant.

One criterion used by curators is the amount of information an artifact conveys, but this as always depends on the questions posed. Material culture studies are intimately concerned with the nature and quality of such queries. Thus, through a careful "material-culture" analysis we can enhance our understanding of objects and broaden our notion of what artifacts, technological or decorative, are relevant to the interpretation of history and society. And, if museum visitors or curators ever wish to understand something about popular conceptions of maritime heritage, they need only look as far as the shelves of the gift shop for important clues. There they may well discover bright reflections of that aspect of our past and perhaps even the artifacts of future exhibits.

NOTES

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1. The following article was prepared in conjunction with a course entitled "Preserving Maritime Heritage" taught by the authors at the University of Victoria, through the Cultural Resource Management Programme, in the fall of 1992. As this was the first time that such a course had been offered in a Canadian university, there were few precedents for its curriculum or organisation. Because the authors are both practising maritime museum curators, and since the focus of the Cultural Resource Management Programme is on professional training, it was decided not to explore maritime heritage as a topic (although this was clearly defined and reviewed in summary) but rather to look at the ways in which it is preserved and interpreted. The emphasis was on the popular and professional manifestations of maritime history within the broader context of the cultural heritage industry. This ensured a distinctly museological perspective on heritage preservation.

The written objectives of the course were to gain a broad understanding of maritime heritage and culture; to examine through a practical exercise some of the issues and ideas raised during the course; to review and analyze current definitions of maritime heritage; to explore the problems and issues associated with the preservation of floating and submerged cultural resources; to discover organizations and resources for maritime heritage preservation; to visit a range of maritime history sites, including vessels, museums and harbour facilities; and to understand material culture studies as a discipline and to explore its relevance to maritime heritage preservation in theory and practice.

2. Robert S. Elliot, "Research Report: Towards a Material Culture Methodology," ***Material History Bulletin,*** XIV (1985), 31-40. Among the other methodologies which Elliot and his group evaluated was E. McClung Fleming, "Artifact Study: A

Proposed Model," ***Winterthur Portfolio,*** IX (1974), 153-173.

3. John Summers, "In Small Things Remembered: Historic Watercraft and Canada's Maritime Heritage," ***The Northern Mariner/Le Marin du Nord,*** II, No. 1 (January/janvier 1992), 15-23.

4. For example, both Mystic Seaport and the Center for Wooden Boats in Seattle have historically-based livery operations where visitors can rent and operate heritage small craft.

5. See for example Howard I. Chapelle, ***American Small Sailing Craft: Their Design, Development and Cons true lion (New*** York, 1951); Kenneth and Helen Durant, ***The Adirondack Guideboat*** (Blue Mountain Lake, NY, 1980); John Gardner, ***Building Classic Small Craft*** (2 vols., Camden, ME, 1977-1984); and Douglas Philips-Bin, ***The Building of Boats*** (Partridge Green, UK, 1979).

6. For an example of how material culture examinations can be used to compare the workmanship of several artifacts, see Philip D. Zimmerman, "Workmanship as Evidence: A Model for Object Study," ***Winterthur Portfolio,*** XVI, No. 4 (1981), 283-308.

7. The idea for this paper came directly from Alan Gowans, "The Case for Kitsch: Popular/Commercial Arts as a Reservoir of Traditional Culture and Humane Values" in Gerald L. Pocius (ed.), ***Living in a Material World: Canadian and American Approaches to Material Culture*** (St. John's, 1991), 127-144. Readers unconvinced by this line of argument are encouraged to consult Dr. Gowans' work.

8. Henry Glassie, "Studying Material Culture Today," ***ibid.,*** 255.

9. For a succinct and enlightening discussion of museum-based research and the intellectual importance of artifacts, see Gregg Finley, "Material History and Curatorship: Problems and Prospects," ***Muse,*** III (Autumn 1985), 34-38.

10. ***Ibid.,*** 36. See also Elliot, "Towards a Material Culture Methodology."

11. Gowans, "The Case for Kitsch," 127-144.