

THE USE OF THREE-DIMENSIONAL OBJECTS
IN THE TEACHING OF HISTORY

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One of the most frequently overlooked resources for teaching and research in history is the use of three-dimensional objects. The value of three-dimensional objects, or artifacts, as "documentary" sources has long been recognized by scholars in the museum field, in archaeology and anthropology, and in American studies, but for far too long historians have been reluctant to move beyond their manuscript sources and explore other ways of investigating the record of the past. Three-dimensional objects can be used in several ways in both traditional lecture courses and in methodology and research seminars.

Objects can serve as a means to enliven and invigorate classroom teaching. That is, objects can become another form of media to be used along with slides, maps, films, cartoons, tapes, and other materials to supplement and illustrate lectures and invite student participation. As Carl Bridenbaugh pointed out in his 1962 presidential address to the American Historical Association, "it has become increasingly difficult for teachers and professors to recapture enough of the sense of the past to enable them to feel and understand it and convey to their readers [and students] what this past was like."¹ The use of objects can help convey this "sense of the past." Far more than slides, films, or other technological devices, three-dimensional objects provide a tangible, "touchable," link with the past. Three-dimensional objects can not only tell us a great deal about the material culture of peoples and periods, they can vividly recreate something of the shapes and colors, even the senses of sight and touch, which permeated the past. They can help us "recapture" the past.

I once had a colleague who introduced his students to medieval history by having them enter a darkened classroom over a floor laid with rushes. Inside they were confronted by the sounds, smells, and objects of a fifteenth-century European village complete with flickering candles, recreated street sounds, and rotting vegetables and fish. Most of us would not care to be this dramatic in introducing our students to "a sense of the past," nor would most of us shoulder a musket and lead students through the Cumberland Gap as a professor of mine once did. But there are practical ways in which we can use three-dimensional objects to help students gain a better feeling for past cultures and peoples.

For example, one of the best ways to help students understand the rich variety and complexity of North American Indian cultures is through the use of objects to illustrate different culture areas: pottery from the Southwest; carved wooden masks from the Pacific coast; floral embroidery and appliqué from the Great Lakes region; split cane basketry from the southern Gulf Coast. Visualizing the differences in materials and patterns used for everyday utensils, as well as decorative work, helps students appreciate the relationship of the people to their physical environment as well as helping them understand something of the diversity of Native American cultures. Pictures and slides could be used to illustrate these points, of course, and in some cases they will have to be used to supplement available artifact collections. But one-dimensional pictures or slides destroy the integrity of the object; they do not convey true color and shape. The experience of seeing and feeling the object, of comparing and handling material, reinforces and dramatizes a point much better than a quick viewing of slides or illustrations, even when these are supplemented by oral or written commentary. Seeing a tightly-woven basket covered with pitch convinces the student that such baskets could indeed be used for carrying water. The intricate patterns of fine quill work will help him better appreciate the statement that the Indian was not an

"uncivilized barbarian" far better than simply reading it in a text or hearing it in a lecture or even viewing a slide which cannot adequately convey the delicacy of the handicraft.

Objects can also help illustrate cultural adaptation. Examining articles which combine European-made goods such as glass beads with traditional native materials or which show the use of native patterns and symbols in European-made articles helps students better understand relationships between peoples and the process of culture change. Showing students a sixteenth-century arquebus and similar firearms of the colonial period and explaining the firing mechanism will help them better understand the problems and nature of the early colonial wars. An inventory of a colonial kitchen with a small collection of everyday utensils, herbs, and tools will help give students a feeling for home and family life. It is also an excellent way to begin a discussion of economic development in the colonial period as they examine maker's marks, learn to detect what was manufactured locally, what had to be imported from Europe, and how home economy contributed to other economic developments.

Use of three-dimensional objects is also an excellent way to help students interpret what they have read. Most students are familiar with terms such as "spinning wheel," "carding," and "homespun," but few have seen homespun nor are they familiar with the processes of carding, spinning, weaving, and sewing a typical seventeenth or eighteenth-century garment. Obviously most of us are not carders and spinners either, but there are many living museum programs which will illustrate these activities for students. Where such programs are not available, a small garment of homemade material will give students a much better understanding of the meaning of the word and what homespun meant to the people who wore it.

Visits to historic houses or living museums are not always easy to arrange, but where such institutions exist within a reasonable distance of the college or university the benefits to be gained from one or more visits are well worth the inconveniences of scheduling, transportation, and other logistical details. In planning for such visits, be sure and visit the site yourself; and be sure you are familiar not only with the collections on display but those in storage which may be of interest or assistance to your students. Most importantly, discuss with the curator or director the type of presentation which will be most helpful to your students. It is usually better to ask the director or a member of the research staff to make presentations to students rather than to rely on volunteer docents who are more accustomed to dealing with tourists and who are not always prepared to provide the kinds of information students will be seeking. It may be that you will want to make the presentation yourself so that you can help place the materials within the context of earlier classroom lectures and discussions. But involve at least a part of the museum staff and prepare the museum staff for the students and vice versa.

Where historic houses or living history museums are not available, or where restraints of time and distance make it impossible to utilize these in your classroom program, it is still possible to obtain collections for classroom use. All may not be original--frequently you may need to rely on reproductions--but again the benefits derived are well worth the time and expense necessary either to personally gather such materials or to make arrangements to borrow them from collectors, museums, or other sources. Some museums have "traveling kits" for classroom use. Although most are designed for elementary and secondary schools, they can be adapted with little difficulty to the needs of college classes. Sometimes it is better to bring the objects to the students where they can be handled, examined, and analyzed,

a practice not always possible or feasible during a museum visit. I am not suggesting that each college teacher become an antique collector or that teaching collections need to be large or expensive. There are a number of easily obtainable and interesting three-dimensional objects which, carefully selected and used, can improve class participation and lead students toward a better understanding of social and cultural history and of economic and political events within a cultural context.

The effective use of three-dimensional objects requires careful preparation. Three-dimensional objects, like other visual aids, must be used with discretion and reason. As one scholar has observed, "Objects should not be used simply as curiosities but as action, three dimensional action associated with the past."² The use of cultural artifacts in the classroom is hardly new or innovative but, unless the method is carefully used with foresight and planning, such presentations can become simply another "gimmick" correctly criticized by our colleagues as unsophisticated and more suitable to elementary than college level classes.³

For those unfamiliar with methods for effective use of three-dimensional objects and museum visits in classroom teaching there are several excellent guides. Of particular help is Walter Rundell, In Pursuit of American History: Research and Training in the United States, especially chapters V and X.⁴ In addition to the various articles and books listed in Rundell's bibliography, back files of History News, published by the American Association of State and Local History, and Museum News, especially the Education Section, will offer a number of useful and practical suggestions, as will several articles in Experiments in History Teaching.⁵

Equally as important as using three-dimensional objects as classroom teaching aids is the need to introduce students, especially senior and graduate students, to the use and interpretation of three-dimensional objects in their own research and writing. Teachers of historical methods who ignore sources other than printed ones are depriving themselves and their students of an important key to understanding the past. Artifacts can serve as sources of information to supplement written documents, and where documents are not available, such objects may be our only sources. Far too often we become so involved in the library and archives that we overlook other types of materials.

Objects are essential for research for prehistoric, non-literate societies, but they are also important for understanding social and cultural contexts of events within historic times and literate societies. The study of characteristic artifacts not only provides examples of industrial and domestic as well as the fine and decorative arts, but such study may also reveal expressions of social purpose. As Carl Schorske points out, "One can analyze a building, a painting, a statue, to see what it contains that enlarges iconographically the discursive knowledge that one can acquire from literary sources."⁶ If we believe Jesse Lemisch and others that American historiography needs to include something of the study of "the inarticulate masses," then it is essential that we use three-dimensional objects as sources for the research and writing of such history.⁷ This is not to suggest that we give up library and archival research, but only that we add a third dimension to our investigations of the past. As Rundell suggests, "The complaint of museum directors that historians are not sufficiently cognizant of the rewards of research among their holdings has been echoed by custodians of virtually every type of local source. That the profession is not taking advantage of the rich variety of local sources available is manifest. . . ."⁸

However, if students are to utilize non-literary sources, they need to learn how such sources are created and how they can be studied and applied

to basic questions of historical research. Like other sources, three-dimensional objects can be misinterpreted and misused if the researcher is not familiar with the techniques of working with and analyzing the data which they can provide. As Patrick Butler has pointed out, "It is . . . important for the historian to give explicit consideration to his assumptions, particularly when dealing with an area such as material culture, which is an area lacking in agreement upon the conventions of analysis." But Butler suggests that materials from anthropology, archaeology, and art history can provide guidance in the use of artifacts as historical sources.⁹

Unfortunately much of the literature dealing with analysis of objects has developed as an adjunct to the collecting of individual artifacts--what one author has labeled "connoisseurship"--which emphasizes identification rather than social and cultural analysis.¹⁰ Fortunately, within recent years, several articles dealing with three-dimensional objects as social and cultural documents have been published. These will serve as an excellent guide to teachers with little or no training in the whys and hows of the use of three-dimensional objects. The theory of use and a suggested model for understanding the relationship between objects and material culture can be found in an article by E. McClung Fleming.¹¹ Also helpful is Patrick Butler's "Material Culture as a Resource in Local History," which provides a critical review of the literature on material culture as it applies to historical research. Butler has also developed a detailed guide for artifact analysis based on the Fleming model, a guide which can be easily adapted for use in courses in historical methodology and graduate seminars. Rundell suggests several ways in which non-literary sources can be fruitfully combined with more traditional approaches, and the bibliography in Schlesinger and Fox, History of American Life, includes objects as sources of information.¹²

Three-dimensional objects are not magic keys to the past. But they can aid in the search for an understanding of the past, and they may suggest new paths for exploration. Wisely used, the study of material culture and artifacts can add a new dimension to teaching and research in history.

NOTES

¹Carl Bridenbaugh, "The Great Mutation," American Historical Review, LXVIII (January, 1963), 329.

²F. L. Rath, "The Museum in the Humanities," Museum News, XLVI (December, 1967), 19.

³Paul Russell, "Artifacts in the Classroom," Experiments in History Teaching (Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1977), 10.

⁴Walter Rundell, In Pursuit of American History: Research and Training in the United States (Norman, Oklahoma, 1970).

⁵In addition to articles by Russell, Spick, and others in Experiments in History Teaching, 9-19, see especially, Doris Platt, "A Contribution to Classroom History Study," Museum News, XLVI (February, 1967), 34-37, and the Rath article cited above.

⁶Carl Schorske, "New Trends in History: A Symposium," Daedalus, XCVIII (Fall, 1969), 934.

⁷Jesse Lemisch, "The Masses: Listening to the 'Inarticulate,'" in Thomas N. Guinsburg, ed., The Dimension of History (Chicago, 1971).

⁸Rundell, In Pursuit of American History, 158.

⁹Patrick H. Butler, "Material Culture as a Resource in Local History: A Bibliography," Newberry Papers in Family and Community History (Chicago, 1977), 7.

¹⁰Ibid., 2.

¹¹E. McClung Fleming, "Artifact Study: A Proposed Model," Winterthur Portfolio, IX (1974), 153-174.

¹²Rundell, In Pursuit of American History, 155-158. Arthur M. Schlesinger and Dixon Ryan Fox, eds., A History of American Life (12 vols., New York, 1927-44). Each volume includes a bibliographical essay with a section on "Physical Survivals."