

# MATERIAL CULTURE STUDIES: ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION

## Course description & goals:

This course examines the material remains of the human past, from the mundane to the transcendent, in order to illuminate the role that physical objects have in shaping human culture, identity, and their analyses. The study of material culture – the “stuff” created, used, and discarded by humans – forms an integral part of archaeological thought and practice. Material culture often allows archaeologists to ask questions and find answers that other evidence does not. Students in this course will examine how material culture can inform archaeological and historical studies of economy, society, gender, religion, colonialism, and cultural change.

In this course we will examine several different types of material culture, including transportable artifacts like pottery as well as permanent, immobile elements of sites. We will interrogate material culture both to learn about the individuals and cultures that create it as well as the life histories of the artifacts themselves. We will draw from the disciplines of anthropology, archaeology, classics, history, and the physical sciences, among others. In addition, we will consider material culture from a variety of theoretical perspectives, such as cultural exchange, object ethnographies, thing theory, and entanglement.

## Coursework:

Over the course of the semester, students will “interrogate” different artifacts and material culture assemblages (including their own garbage!) through different analytical lenses. Each assignment will ask students to consider material culture from a new and different perspective. Students will also engage with material culture in a larger, end-of-semester analysis of an entire artifact assemblage. Students will first propose an analysis of this assemblage which is grounded in one of the theoretical perspectives encountered during the course. This analysis will then be presented in the form of a research paper at the end of the semester. During the semester, students will be required to visit an art museum and an historical site or museum as part the required “readings.”

## Grading:

1. Attendance and participation (10%)
2. Two artifact interrogations (20% each, 40% total)
3. Proposal and bibliography (10%)
4. Presentation of analysis (10%)
5. Final assemblage analysis (30%)

## Required texts:

Harvey, Karen. 2009. *History and Material Culture: A Student's Guide to Approaching Alternative Sources*.

Hodder, Ian. 2012. *Entangled: An Archaeology of the Relationships between Humans and Things*.

Mauss, Marcel. 2000. *The Gift: The Form and Reason for Exchange in Archaic Societies*.

*N.b.:* Additional readings will be assigned in the form of articles and book chapters. These will be made available to students via the course website. Students are also required to visit an art museum and a historical site during this course.

Week 1: Introduction to Material Culture Studies: the Human Past from Stuff

Read: Harvey, *History and Material Culture*, chapter 1, “Things that Shape History”  
and chapter 6 “Object Biographies”

Week 2: Thinking about Things in Archaeology and Anthropology

Read: Miller, *Stuff*, chapter 2, “Thinking about Things”

Hodder, *Entangled*, chapter 1, “Thinking about Things Differently”

Küchler, “Materiality and cognition: the changing face of things,” in *Materiality (Politics, History, and Culture)*

**Artifact Interrogation 1 Assigned**

Week 3: Connoisseurship and Art Historical Approaches to Material Culture

Read: Montgomery, “The Connoisseurship of Artifacts,” in *Material Culture Studies in America*

**Art Museum Visit**

Week 4: Understanding Archaeological Materials in Context

Read: Crummy, “Six Honest Serving Men: a Basic Methodology for the Study of Small Finds,”  
in *Roman Finds: Context and Theory*

Shanks, “Three Rooms: Archaeology and Performance,” *Journal of Social Archaeology*

**Artifact Interrogation 1 Due**

Week 5: Objects and Exchange

Read: Mauss, *The Gift*, chapters 1-4

Week 6: Material Culture and Identity

Read: Harvey, *History and Material Culture*, chapter 7, “Regional Identity and Material Culture”

Mattingly, “Being Roman: expressing identity in a provincial setting,” *Journal of Roman Archaeology*

**Proposal and Bibliography Due**

Week 7: From Pottery to People

Read: Pitts, “Artefact suites and social practice: an integrated approach to Roman provincial finds  
assemblages,” in *Facta: A Journal of Roman Material Culture Studies*

Hawkes, “Beyond Romanization: The Creolization of Food. A framework for the Study of Faunal  
Remains from Roman Sites,” in *Papers from the Institute of Archaeology*

Week 8: Objects and Entanglement

Read: Hodder, *Entanglement*, chapters 2-5

**Artifact Interrogation 2 Assigned**

Week 9: Artifacts, Museums, and Exhibits

**Historical Site Visit**

Week 11: Documentary Evidence and Material Culture

Read: Allison, “Using the Material and Written Sources: Turn of the Millennium Approaches to Roman  
Domestic Space,” *American Journal of Archaeology*

**Artifact Interrogation 2 Due**

Week 10: Material Culture, Space, and Landscapes

Read: Harvey, *History and Material Culture*, chapter 3, “Back Yards and Beyond”

Grahame, “Public and private in the Roman house: the spatial order of the Casa del Fauno,” in *Domestic Space in the Roman world: Pompeii and Beyond*

Pitts and Perring, “The making of Britain's first urban landscapes: the case of late Iron Age and Roman Essex,” *Britannia*

Week 12: Material Cultures of Gender, Power, and Status

Read: Harvey, *History and Material Culture*, chapter 2 “Ornaments as Evidence”

Dusselier, “Bonbons, Lemon Drops, and Oh Henry! Bars: Candy, Consumer Culture, and the Construction of Gender, 1895-1920,” in *Kitchen Culture in America*

DeMarras and Earl, “Ideology, materialization and power ideologies,” *Current Anthropology*

Week 13: **Presentations**

Week 14: Wrapping Up: the Future of Material Culture Studies

**Final Assemblage Analysis Due**