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History and Material Culture

Karen Harvey

History and Material Culture

A student's guide to approaching
alternative sources

Edited by Karen Harvey

Contents

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1 Things that shape history

Material culture and historical narratives

Giorgio Riello

Beds, pans and teacups, mirrors and combs, stools and chairs, sheets, covers, Coca-Cola bottles, Walkmans, cars and old coaches, diamonds, chests of drawers, toilets, stiletto shoes, antiques, oddities and monstrosities. This is not a summary of items appearing on *The Antiques Roadshow* but a succinct list of things that appear as subject matters dealt with in articles and books written by historians. This list should not mislead us into thinking that historians consider 'things' as either important or interesting per se. In the reading list of material culture, one will not find any of the brilliant old-fashioned antiquarian types of titles such as 'Old English bedsteads' or 'Some early English sea service buttons'.¹ Historians are as or even more interested in a thick conceptual 'sauce' that includes savoury concepts such as gender, class, identity, politics, and the usual carousel of presentations and representations, perspectives, semiotics and theoretical underpinnings.

This essay reflects on the relationship between the methodologies and conceptual categories used by historians and their recent engagement with material culture. My specific concern is the relationship between artefacts and the large concepts that historians constantly mobilize to understand the past – what I call 'narratives' or 'tropes'. Historians are increasingly presented with isolated objects, often de-contextualized, which they seek to fit (alongside other events, facts and analyses) within the broad narratives that preside over history as a subject. The rise of capitalism, the Renaissance, the Industrial Revolution, globalization and the like are all 'big boxes' that even the most astute postmodernist cannot avoid without difficulty. Historians also construct their scholarship in very precise ways, by adopting widely shared methodologies. This chapter asks whether material culture helps historians to do things differently.

I will address these issues by considering three case studies, which I suggest represent three of the ways in which history relates to material culture. I have chosen a rather fatty eighteenth-century stomacher, a seventeenth-century broken wine cup and a nineteenth-century print. However, before looking at this selection of items it is worth reviewing the general approaches historians have employed in the burgeoning field of material culture studies.

Varieties of material cultures

Historians have survived, even thrived, during the last two centuries with little or no engagement with objects. In many ways, it appears that historians do not feel at ease when dealing with material things.² Yet, arguably objects reveal history in important ways and, indeed, the study of material culture has significantly influenced the field of history in recent years.³

History from things

A first way in which historians relate to material culture is by concentrating on its material form and treating it in the same way in which they treat a manuscript, a diary, an inventory or an image: objects as primary sources. In this case, artefacts are important because they can be used as evidence of something that was part of the past. This is what I call *history from things*, in which material artefacts are used as raw materials for the discipline of history and the interpretation of the past. The pay-off for historians is a wider (more numerous but also more varied) collection of sources through which to back their arguments and interpretations.

History of things

Historians are not necessarily interested in uncovering another saucepan, or finding out a previously unknown variety of medieval roasting fork. In the subject of history the material finding does not constitute research and will not be given much space in the pages of a historical publication. The development of studies on consumption and the coming of age of design as respectable fields of historical enquiry have meant an increasing interest in material artefacts. Today the bulk of the history of material culture is about *history of things*, that is to say the historical analysis of the relationship between objects, people and their representations.⁴

Things are important in all those areas of history in which they played a relevant part. If a historian is interested in analysing the philosophical thought of Voltaire, he or she will find little help by examining Voltaire's teacup, or any eighteenth-century teacup for that matter. But if one is instead interested in considering the culture of politeness, the examination of tea services, snuff boxes and Hogarth prints might be very relevant. There are many different approaches towards the *history of things*: the finding of deeper personal meanings in individual objects (as magisterially done by Laurel Thatcher Ulrich), or less personal, quantitative analysis of ownership patterns (as found in the scholarship of Lorna Weatherill).⁵ In both the object is not a 'prop of research' but the very subject matter of analysis. In this case the pay-off for historians is the capacity to extend their coverage by producing new fields (and new depths) of historical enquiry, often based on a high degree of interdisciplinarity.

Table 1.1 Varieties of material culture, methods and narratives

Variety of material culture	Cases	Things, methodologies and narratives
History from things	1	<div>Thing</div> <div>A 'concealed' stonacher</div> <div>Methodology</div> <div>Integration of sources</div> <div>Narrative</div> <div>Choice of a narrative</div>
History of things	2	<div>Methodology</div> <div>Interdisciplinary research</div> <div>Narrative</div> <div>The consumer revolution</div> <div>Thing</div> <div>Pottery excavated in Jamestown</div>
History and things	3	<div>Narrative</div> <div>The Industrial Revolution</div> <div>Thing</div> <div>A cut image of a flying machine</div> <div>Methodology</div> <div>Revising positivism</div>

History and things

A third way of considering material artefacts is by positioning them outside history altogether. The subject of history has been slow at accepting this more 'democratic' vision of material culture in which material objects are not in a servile position to historical scholarship. Other disciplines, such as sociology, archaeology and anthropology, have developed flexible methodologies of analysis of material artefacts by stating their heuristic independence. History has been slow to recognize the material world's capacity to challenge the overall concept of the analysis of the past by evoking and shaping new processes of gathering, systematizing and presenting ideas. Artefacts have long brought the past to life for wider audiences via museum displays and television documentaries and dramas. They provide both immediacy and a direct way for people to relate to the past, qualities of which professional history has been wary. *History and things* provides a qualitative pay-off for historians: the capacity to unlock more creative and freer ways of conveying ideas about the past that are not necessarily mediated by written language in books and articles produced by professional historians.

The rest of this chapter will 'put into practice' these different approaches. I wish to show how there are different ways in which material culture relates both to the 'big' concepts of history and to the methodologies through which historians construct their scholarship. The following case studies present objects from 1600 to 1850, and are intended not as a guide for 'ideal' historical analysis,⁶ but as a reflection on how artefacts have inspired historians to ask new questions, to challenge established paradigms and formulate new interpretations (Table 1.1).

Concealed capitalism: things that money can't buy

Things: a 'concealed' stonacher

In 1980 Mr and Mrs Maynard moved into their new cottage in Nether Wallop, Hampshire, UK. The house was in a state of disrepair, and restructuring soon

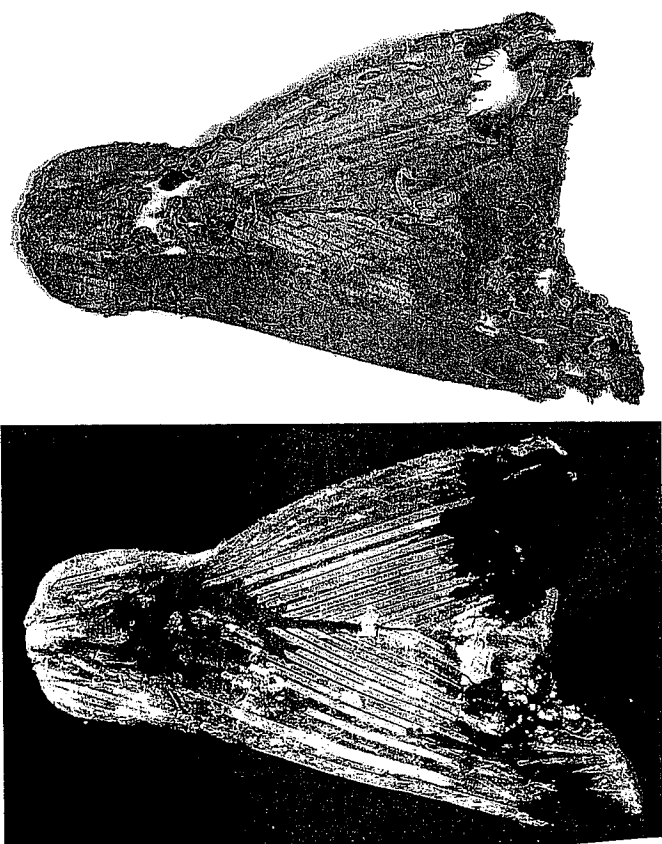


Figure 1.1 Early eighteenth-century stonacher found at a cottage in Nether Wallop, Hampshire, United Kingdom, and an X-radiography showing strips of whalebone. Deliberately Concealed Garments Project, Winchester School of Art, University of Southampton CG8 a. © The Textile Conservation Centre, University of Southampton and Sonia O'Connor, University of Bradford.

started. During the process, the Maynards uncovered what appeared at first sight to be a bundle of rubbish stuck in the chimney breast. On closer examination, they discovered that the bundle consisted of a velvet waistcoat and a stonacher, wrapped in paper. Once the excitement of this finding waned, the Maynards put all objects in a plastic bag in the old bread oven 'as we didn't quite know what to do with them'.⁷ One of the paper fragments is a newspaper dated 1752, thus providing the earliest date when they were left there, though the remaining objects are earlier. The stonacher (Figure 1.1) pre-dates the concealment and was originally a corset. Signs of wear and repair suggest that at some time, probably in the early eighteenth century, it was cut down into a stonacher. The garment is also atypical because the material is stiffened with strips of whalebone.⁸

The Maynards' finding is not unique. What they found was a cache of 'deliberately concealed objects'. The practice of concealing objects, especially garments, in the very fabric of buildings was undertaken from the Middle Ages to the twentieth century in many parts of the world, and especially in Northern Europe, North

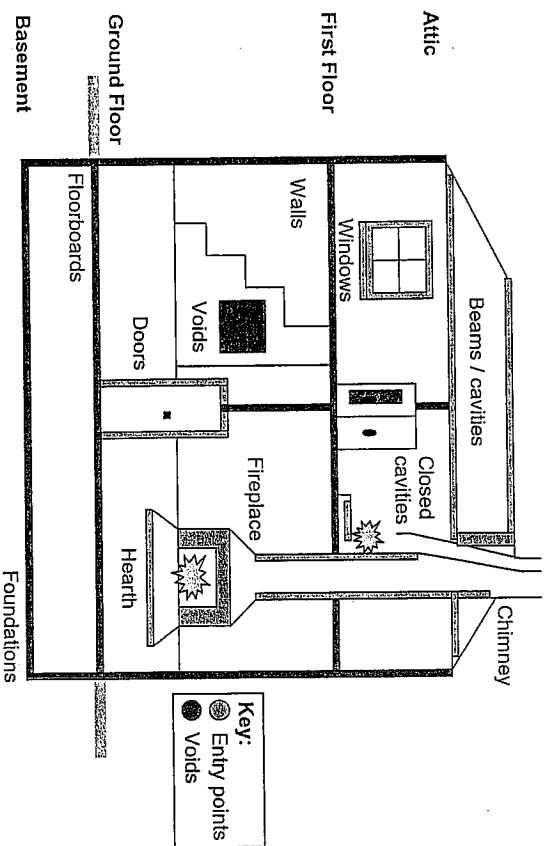


Figure 1.2 Diagram showing common locations of concealed objects found in sites in the United Kingdom. © The Textile Conservation Centre, University of Southampton.

America and Australia.⁹ The demolition and restructuring of old buildings has unearthed many such objects. In the late 1960s the Northampton Boot and Shoe Collection started preserving and cataloguing footwear concealed in buildings.¹⁰ Since 1998 the Concealed Garments Project at the Winchester School of Art has been, under the direction of Dinah Eastop, recording, preserving and interpreting concealed garments and other objects found in British buildings.¹¹

Why did people decide to hide a shoe or a stomacher in the wall of their house? This question has no definitive answer. Archaeological analyses suggest that they were primarily concealed in junctures between old and new parts of buildings or within points of entry and exit such as doorways, windows and chimneys (Figure 1.2).¹² The fact that their placing was intentional is suggested not just by the numerous findings with similar patterns of concealment, but also by the more puzzling practice of mutilation of such objects. Garments are often found knotted, suggesting that their placing within a wall was supposed to terminate their function as clothing. Historians, anthropologists and experts agree that such objects were hidden with the intent of protecting the house and its inhabitants from malign forces and were placed in the most vulnerable points of connection with the outside world. It also appears that these objects invoke the physical presence of their wearers and owners. In the case of the Nether Wallop finding, even the paper scraps were cut in the shape of garments.

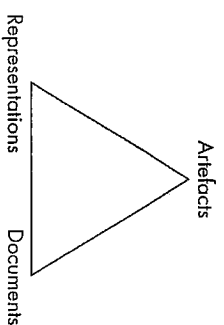


Figure 1.3 Sources for historical enquiry

Methodologies: the integration of sources

What makes the stomacher found in the cottage at Nether Wallop and similar concealed objects so remarkable is that they refer to a practice that has no known documentary evidence. No contemporary letters, diaries or manuscripts have been identified that record such items. Here, then, the idea of the 'object survivor' is more than a simple cliché. It is only through the engagement with the object (but also its location, finding and story) that historical questions over the meaning of protection for householders in the early modern period can be raised.

This specific case is indicative of wider trends in history: what I call the integration of sources. Historians are asked to extend their remit of investigation also to non-documentary evidence, the most important categories of which are artefacts and visual representations (Figure 1.3). The strict boundaries by which historians read documents in dusty archives, while art historians analyse paintings, and museum curators and archaeologists deal with objects have now been superseded. In many cases written records remained the favourite source material and are just accompanied by representations and objects that back the argument created by documentary evidence. The addition of an image or reference to an object is not sufficient to create a dialogue with other sources.

Narratives: how to choose one

History from things should move beyond either the object as example or the object as an easy prop. Objects should not be used as an aid for providing enhanced answers, but for asking better questions. So far, I have located an early eighteenth-century stomacher in terms of its discovery, but I have also purposely contextualized the object within a specific interpretation or narrative: stomacher as a concealed garment. The fact that it was found with other objects and that all circumstantial evidence suggests that it was purposely hidden in a wall cavity, has made us accept that:

- 1 there is a direct relationship between this object and a specific socio-cultural practice that we find in history
- 2 this stomacher belongs to a category of objects that we call 'concealed garments'

- 3 it is a tool for historians to understand and investigate a rather mysterious social practice.

These three points derive from the fact the stomacher is part of a cache of objects and that this cache found in Neither Wallop is similar to hundreds of others. The meaning given to the stomacher is referenced to a series of objects.

I am not suggesting that the stomacher is not a concealed garment, but only that historians and researchers have decided, beyond reasonable doubt and through a process of thorough checking, that it is. This has created a narrative for this object that the very materiality of the object does not support. Such a narrative relates to a socio-cultural practice in which this object found itself at a certain point in time. If we use Apparudai's concept of the 'social life of things',¹³ the stomacher was something else at the beginning of its life, was recycled as a garment in the early eighteenth century, became a concealed garment only some time after 1752, disappeared for nearly 260 years and is now in a storeroom at the Winchester Centre for Textile Conservation together with other textiles, from precious silks to pockets and large tapestries.

In the overall 'life' of this object, it has been characterized by one specific stage, that of concealment. We have 'narrativized' this stomacher and scholarship has created around it further explanations: where and what type of things are concealed, the possible reasons for concealment, how concealment relates to the wider early modern belief system, etc. One can use theory and historical scholarship on magic, folklore and village life to provide an even wider background. The stomacher is therefore contextualized and can be accessed by any historian who can see the garment, look at other objects, read articles on the concealed garments project, as well as books on magic, early modern socio-economic practices, and the anthropology and sociology of similar practices around the world.

My point is that if I had seen this stomacher in a museum display or storeroom, without any previous knowledge of its story and affiliation, I could have reached very different conclusions and located the stomacher within altogether different narratives. Artefacts are multifarious entities whose nature and heuristic value is often determined by the diverse range of narratives that historians bring with them. Here are some examples.

A stomacher and the narrative of dress and fashion

The Nether Wallop stomacher is probably one of the earliest examples of printed linen in England. The textile printing industry developed in the last quarter of the seventeenth century around London, but few textiles or garments from this period survive. The printed linen of the stomacher shows the limited expertise on this branch of textile finishing acquired in England by the early eighteenth century. In the narrative of textiles, this stomacher is not just a 'perfect example', but also a very rare one. Particular attention could be given also to the design and colours in the discussion of the meaning of colours in the early modern period.¹⁴ A stomacher could be also productively contextualized in the wider narrative of the relationship between clothing, sexuality and gender.¹⁵

A stomacher and the narrative of the body and anthropocentrism

The stomacher could also be contextualized in wider historical discussions about the relevance of the body and the senses in historical investigation. Clothing has often been examined in relation to the body. The physicality of the owner is materialized through the survival of textiles and garments.¹⁶ The stomacher was worn by a woman, and was later probably used as a ritual object for its capacity to represent a physical person. Does this mean that an object like a stomacher makes our understanding of social practices more tangible or more 'personal'? Not necessarily. Ewa Domanska comments about the fact that objects support a 'non-anthropocentric history' in which the inorganic (rather than the human) is to be at the centre of attention.¹⁷

A stomacher and the narrative of bio-diversity

The Nether Wallop stomacher has been thoroughly studied not just by historians, curators and restorers but also by scientists. X-radiography was adopted to study the internal structure and materials of the garment.¹⁸ It confirmed that the stomacher is stiffened with strips of whalebone. DNA analysis showed that the material came from a North Atlantic whale (*Enbalaena glacialis*). Marine biologists had previously thought that the mitochondrial lineage of this species of ballen had remained unaltered over the centuries. However the DNA analysis of the stomacher showed that this 'bio-diversity narrative' was incorrect as the whalebone came from a previously unrecorded species.¹⁹

A stomacher and the narrative of buildings

Perhaps the object we should be interested in is not the stomacher but the building where it was found. The stomacher could be contextualized within a wider investigation of buildings, as done for instance by Matthew Johnson in his *An Archaeology of Capitalism* (1996). In this case the artefact considered is the building itself that stands as testimony to the ways in which space was articulated in early modern England.²⁰ One could map the findings of objects against the paradigm of the so-called 'Great Rebuilding' of Tudor and Stuart times. Were concealed objects to be found mostly in the new buildings erected between 1570 and 1640? What do they have to do with the changing layouts of properties? Or perhaps with the appearance of nuclear families? Or simply with the accumulation of new goods? Do they belong to a wider spectrum of household practices?²¹

A stomacher and the narrative of commodification in capitalism

The Nether Wallop stomacher could also be fruitfully used to discuss the relationship between the meaning and economic value of commodities in the early modern period. The stomacher shows that the garment was heavily used and passed through a series of stages in its functional life. It was recycled, as most artefacts were, in a

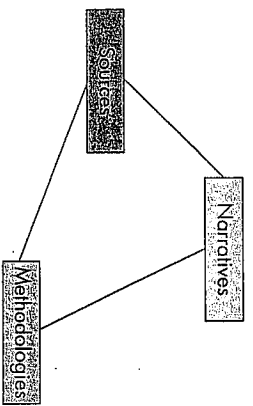


Figure 1.4 The relationship between sources, narratives and methodologies

world of material dearth.²² Concealed garments, however, seem at odds with traditional narratives of commodification under capitalist regimes, which indicate that during the early modern period artefacts became increasingly part of a commercialized culture. Marxist and Marxian interpretations identify an emerging separation between economic value and personal/subjective attributes in relation to the making and use of artefacts. In this case the specific object is adjacent to a large-scale narrative, politically created and since used by historians to describe a general transition towards a 'modern' capitalist world.²³ Concealed objects show instead the endurance of a profound belief system created and structured through processes of de-commodification (symbolized by the mutilation of the clothing).

This case study has supported the idea of a strong integration between sources, narratives and methodologies (Figure 1.4). We have started by considering artefacts as sources (*history from things*), but we have soon discovered that artefacts are given specific narratives and can be 'adopted' in historical research through different methodologies. My second case study concentrates on methodologies and examines the ways in which interdisciplinary artefact-based research might challenge historical narratives.

A global consumer revolution: broken all in pieces

Methodologies: the power of interdisciplinarity

The last three decades have seen the emergence of a new field of historical enquiry that has been defined as 'history of consumption'.²⁴ The main interest of history of consumption is the examination of the pattern and meanings of consumption through history. Central to the field of history of consumption has been an interest in the very material objects that were produced, bought and consumed to satisfy people's physical, but also relational, psychological and moral needs. History of consumption is quintessentially a *history of things*, as what it wishes to explain is why, how and what becomes part of the material world that surrounds human beings.²⁵

The success of history of consumption has been based on multi/interdisciplinarity.²⁶ Basic historical narratives have been created, revised, criticized and sometimes dismissed not so much through in-depth primary research, but by forging alliances across disciplines through the medium of objects.²⁷ If one concentrates on the eighteenth century and the so-called 'birth of a consumer society', it is evident how material culture has created a fertile terrain for discussion and confrontation. It is not uncommon to find in explanations of the eighteenth-century consumer revolution references to anthropologists such as Mary Douglas and Daniel Miller, sociologists such as Arjun Appadurai, Ben Fine and Ellen Leopold, and Grant McCracken, and philosophers such as Pierre Bourdieu and Michel Foucault.

Narratives: shifting the consumer revolution

History of consumption came to the fore in 1982 with the publication of *The Birth of a Consumer Society* by Neil McKendrick, John Brewer and Jack Plumb.²⁸ Their narrative was constructed around the idea of a consumer revolution in eighteenth-century Britain based not just on an increasing income and wider supplies of cheap consumer goods, but also on emulative forces of a Veblenian nature.²⁹ This original formulation was heavily criticized but sparked a series of further studies on eighteenth-century consumption.³⁰ Lorna Weatherill shifted the agenda to the more personal meanings of possession by drawing on Goffman's theories of front- and backstage.³¹ Other historians considered consumption and the possible emergence of a consumer society from specific angles that included gender, domesticity, politeness, urban living, the press, clothing, luxury, and even more traditional perspectives such as the political economy, manufacturing and the history of specific commodities. The consolidation and expansion of the field of history of consumption did not mean a separation from other disciplines, rather the opposite. Recent works show a surprising intensification of interdisciplinarity not just by historians dialoguing with other disciplines but also through the direct participation of sociologists, anthropologists, historical geographers and literary scholars in what were previously seen as quintessentially historical debates.

Three developments have characterized the narrative of the consumer revolution during the last decade. First, the move towards a deeper and more sophisticated analysis of artefacts. Joint conferences, workshops and research projects between museums and universities are cementing a more direct engagement for historians with material objects. Second, the paradigm of the consumer revolution has been challenged and its chronologies recast. Research on consumption has gone back in time to the Middle Ages and forward into the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Attempts have been made to construct a wider explanation of change over the *longue durée*. Finally, the remit of research has become geographically broader. The Anglocentric formulation of a consumer revolution has expanded with studies on Europe and North America in the 1980s and 1990s. More recently, historians have fully embraced a more global agenda. One of the key topics has been how much consumption can explain Western economic and social dominance over the last two or three centuries, and how it connects with the concept of globalization.³²

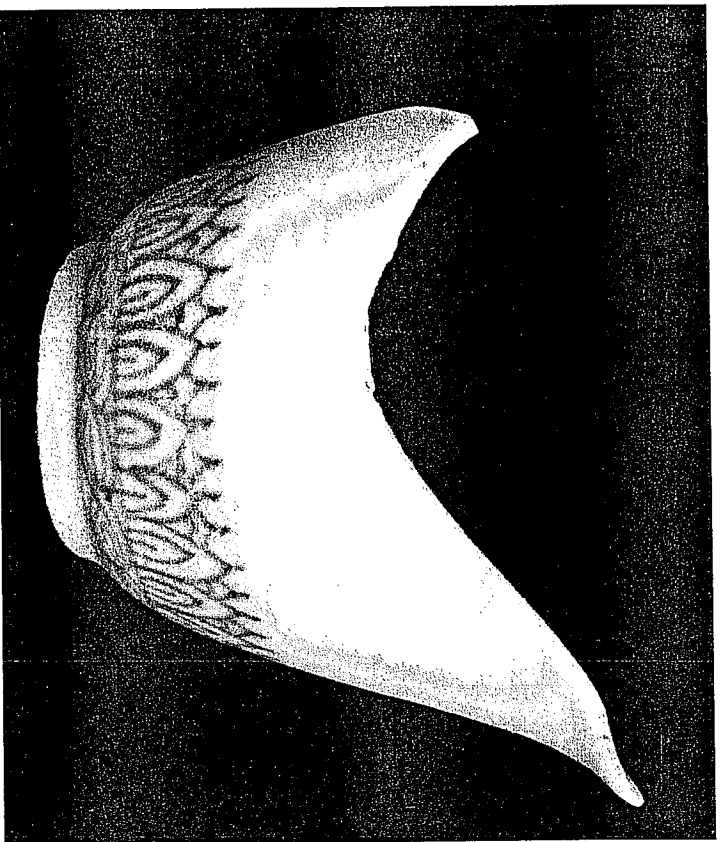


Figure 1.5 Wan Li porcelain wine cup, c. 1610; porcelain thinly glazed with underglaze blue with a scroll design above the footring, width 5.41 inches, height 4.64 inches. Rediscovered in Jamestown, Virginia, Pit 4. © APVA Preservation Virginia.

Things: broken pieces from/of china

This scholarship in 'global consumption' is interested in objects such as the cup in Figure 1.5. More than a dozen of these cups have been found on Virginian archaeological sites. They are thinly glazed wine cups of high quality and have been found as part of the extensive archaeological survey of Jamestown carried out over the last three decades. They are some of the more than 150,000 objects recovered in digs that unearthed tools, coins, parts of furnishings, decorative items, residues of food, potteries and ceramics. Nearly half the objects date to the first years of English settlement in 1607–10.³³

Ceramics, and porcelain in particular, have played an important part in the study of history of consumption and the consumer revolution in Europe. They figured highly among the different consumer items that enjoyed widespread success in eighteenth-century Europe. Any eighteenth-century conversation piece (portraits of upper- and middle-class families in informal situations) shows the presence of the necessary tools of polite sociability, such as porcelain cups and saucers and

teapots. Pewter plates were also replaced by ceramic and porcelain ones. While porcelain items were still relatively uncommon in the early seventeenth century, by the end of the century they had entered all prosperous households and, during the following century, came within reach of the lower strata of society. Porcelains are therefore 'perfect examples' for a 'consumer revolution' as they were not just new commodities sought after by consumers, but also explain the search for substitutes in Europe (from Majolica to different types of glazed earthenware), and the importance of global trade in the early modern period.

The broken wine cup found in Jamestown was not a locally produced artefact. It was not even a European object as the old continent learned the secret of porcelain production only in the early eighteenth century. The underglaze blue motif and porcelain body identify it as a Chinese 'Wan Li' porcelain.³⁴ One can only be surprised to learn that in the early years of settlement of North America, the 225 English colonists had at their disposal high-quality consumer goods coming from the other side of the world. They could have brought these Chinese porcelains with them from England or received them from European merchants.

What is certain is that these items were the latest fashion. Before 1600, little Chinese porcelain entered Europe. It was with the setting up of the Dutch and English East India companies trading with Asia at the very beginning of the seventeenth century that trade in these commodities started in earnest. In 1602 the Dutch seized two Portuguese vessels trading in the Indian Ocean. One of them contained 10,000 pieces of Chinese porcelain. During the following couple of years the sale of these porcelains created a china-mania in Holland.³⁵ Evidence of the fact that Chinese porcelains were highly sought after can be found by looking at figures. It is estimated that, between 1600 and 1800, the Dutch East India Company imported 43 million pieces of porcelain from Asia. This was in addition to 30 million pieces imported by the English, French, Swedish and Danish companies.³⁶

The study of the global trade in porcelain – but also in cotton textiles and other exotic products such as lacquerware, ornamental bronze and brassware, ivory, jade and other precious materials – is part of the re-configuration of the Anglocentric narrative of a consumer revolution into a much wider, often global setting.³⁷ It has been argued that such products were part of 'global commodities' that changed the consumer tastes not just of Europeans, but also Africans, as well as indigenous and new populations in the Americas. They have also been taken as evidence of an early modern phase of globalization with increasing trade, but also cultural and material connections across vast parts of Eurasia, Africa and the Americas.

The finding of a Chinese wine cup in an early North American settlement clearly confirms, if not even strengthens, this narrative. The cosmopolitan nature of trade is materialized not just through this specific artefact, but also through another hundred types of potteries and ceramics found in Jamestown.³⁸ Apart from Wan Li, there are at least another two varieties of Chinese porcelains present in Jamestown: the Swatow and the Krak types.³⁹ The remaining ceramics and potteries have been identified as coming from England, France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Spain and Portugal, as well as locally produced wares.⁴⁰ The global richness of the material culture of a rather remote place in the early seventeenth century can be taken as

an indicator of the high degree of interconnectedness of the early modern world. In its early years of European settlement, North America was already part of a web of global connections and a process that we call globalization.

Extending narratives and revising methods

The ceramics unearthed at Jamestown are significant findings as they have helped historians to shift the narrative of consumption within a more global framework. They act as connecting elements between debates over globalization, the relevance of the exchange of goods and the historical significance of consumer choices.⁴¹ I have briefly contextualized a Wan Li wine cup within a series of other ceramics present in Jamestown in 1607–10 and coming from several parts of the world. I have also presented figures on the European trade in Chinese porcelain over a longer period, which has allowed us to explain the ‘scale’ of the phenomenon. Although this cup is quite unique, it is also just one of a million similar cases, most of which have left no material trace.⁴² The historian of material culture is asked to assess how common or how unique a specific artefact might be.

Second, the Wan Li wine cup shows a problem in connecting objects and narratives. Objects are more static than narratives: the broken pieces of porcelain found in Jamestown tell us a great deal about the sophistication of the consumer culture of this place and its world connections at the very beginning of the seventeenth century, but they tell us nothing about the overall evolution (the dynamic) aspect of either the consumer revolution or globalization. They are unable to tell us, for instance, if the world in 1750 was more or less globalized. This is because individual objects are often, though not always, the fruit of a specific time and place when/where they are produced, exchanged and consumed. This is why there are questions and problems that cannot be solved just by considering artefacts from one space/time.

The Jamestown ceramics tell us that this was a rather ‘cosmopolitan’ and ‘global’ place, but what does it say about the process of globalization? Nearly everything published by economists, sociologists and historians on globalization implies that this is a cumulative and progressive process. But was the world of Virginia even more cosmopolitan in the eighteenth or nineteenth centuries? The answer is no. As archaeologists at Jamestown observed: ‘As England attained commercial control of North America in the late 17th century, the material record becomes more homogenous and more predominantly English.’⁴³ The European discovery of the process of porcelain production and, more importantly, the increasing power of Britain in the geo-politics of the Atlantic Ocean, shows a shift of Virginian material culture into the orbit of English consumer culture, with Staffordshire ware replacing Chinese, German or Italian artefacts.

By comparing objects across time, researchers can cast doubt on the idea that the process of commercial globalization is linear and incremental. By connecting different narratives, such as the consumer revolution and globalization, a classic example of the history of things has been transformed into a powerful tool to re-think wider narratives in global history.

The Industrial Revolution: the greatest invention of all times

Narratives: the Industrial Revolution

The final case study focuses on a well-known historical narrative: the Industrial Revolution. The Industrial Revolution is not a precise event in time, but a series of historical changes, geographically located in the British Isles between the 1770s and the 1840s. Historians like to define the Industrial Revolution as a process of self-sustained and continuative economic growth joint with social transformation, urbanization, the intensification of labour and, above all, capital-intensive technological innovation. This is a rather technical definition, especially if we consider that, together with the French Revolution and the Renaissance, the Industrial Revolution is a historical narrative that transcends the confines of the subject of history. It is a label commonly used by the media and in everyday speech.

In its more popular version, the Industrial Revolution can be summarized by a series of images that we have in our minds that include locomotives, great inventors, factories, long working hours, cotton mills and machinery. The historical narrative is broken down into ‘vignettes’, some of which refer to specific artefacts such as a factory in Manchester, a spinning machine at the Science Museum, or the portrait of Richard Arkwright. The narrative that is widely accepted – perhaps not by historians, but more importantly by everyone else – is actually formed not by books in libraries, or figures and graphs, but by images and objects. In 1947 Klingender published a book entitled *Art and the Industrial Revolution*, in which he united narrative, object and representation, though his remit of art was just flat representational forms such as paintings and prints. His book remains the best visual catalogue of what we define as the Industrial Revolution.⁴⁴

Since 1947 the concept of the Industrial Revolution has been the subject of criticism, especially from postmodern scholarship, claiming that the Industrial Revolution never really happened: one can find economic growth, urbanization, technological innovation, but the bestowing of a systemic meaning on these events remains rather controversial.⁴⁵ The de-constructivist mood of much postmodernism underlines how the more one starts questioning the relationship between the sources (events, people, figures, documents, but also representations and artefacts) that support the narrative of the ‘Industrial Revolution’, the more the narrative disintegrates. One might argue that this is a good thing, though it does not help us in at least two ways. First, while the narrative might be thought unsound, it may remain useful (and this is probably why it was constructed in the very first instance). The Industrial Revolution might have never existed, but we find it useful to refer to it as a ‘ready-made’ label. Second, the more materials one takes away, the less one can grasp the contours of the ‘bigger picture’.

Things: a cut image of a flying machine

What happens when, instead of subtracting, we add a new element? This is what many historians are asked to do: to uncover missing or previously unknown

materials. Our engagement with primary sources is not the result of a profound love for dusty archives (or cold museum storages for the historians of material culture), but generates from the idea that what we find there is the 'gem', something that can become a new piece in the puzzle.

My new piece is an artefact: a two-dimensional representation of what the included text calls 'The Aerial Steam Carriage' (Figure 1.6). This is, first of all, an 'image' or a representation. But at the same time it is an artefact, a material object that in this case is glued to a heavy paper support (something that cannot easily be conveyed through this text). Such support suggests that it was part of a larger folio, possibly a scrapbook, a collection of cut images produced especially by young ladies in Victorian times as a hobby. It is not a print, but rather a cut image. This is evident by the fact that one can distinguish the lettering on the back. Considering the quality of the paper, one can say it is a newspaper page, though I have still to identify from which newspaper it comes or its precise date. I bought it some years ago for the princely sum of 50 pence simply because it was a mysterious (and alarmingly cheap) object.

This print presented me with two problems. First, airplanes did not exist in Victorian times. It is well known that it was the Wright brothers in the early twentieth century (not in Victorian times) in the USA (not in England) that performed the first flight. Second, the very technology used (combustion engines) had not been invented in the early Victorian age. As I was pretty sure that airplanes did not feature at the time of Industrial Revolution, my print was framed and displayed in my office where – very much like the Maynards' concealed garments – it lay unexplained and unquestioned for the next few years.

During those years, I wrote and taught several times on the merits and demerits of the Industrial Revolution. It was mostly an exercise in presenting a combination of argument and evidence, all of which is positivistic in nature, in the sense that it builds up to fit the narrative that we call the Industrial Revolution. From time to time, a fellow historian will unearth a new piece of evidence or propose a new

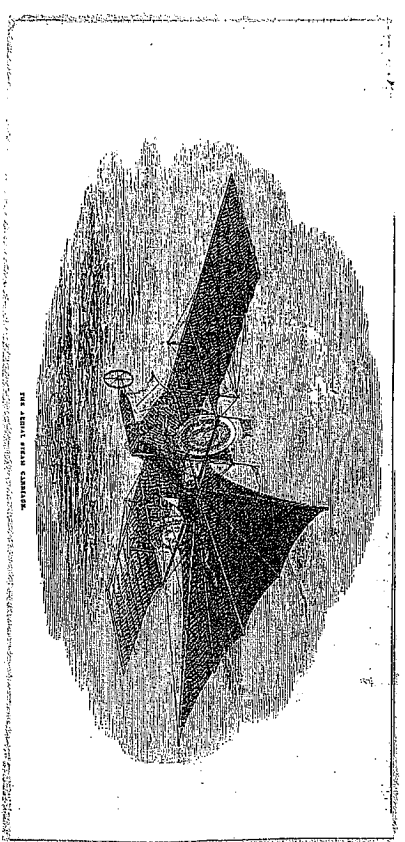


Figure 1.6 'The Aerial Steam Carriage', newspaper cutting, c.1840–45.

explanation; more rarely we update our technical language or propose new concepts, thus slightly shifting the narrative. At the back of my mind was however an object whose very existence I could explain only by locating it outside the narrative of the Industrial Revolution. This was a print created by someone with a great deal of ingenuity and fantasy, and probably collected by a young lady because it was 'charming'. It had nothing to do with factories, Richard Arkwright, cotton or the Industrial Revolution as a whole; what it represented never existed.

Things: more prints of flying machines

Per se, this print is a trivial object: it does not even have the status of a museum artefact and did not fetch more than 50 pence. But what if someone had really invented a flying machine in early Victorian England? Would this have been the triumph of 'industrialism'? Wasn't it the case that my perceived disconnection between the narrative that I taught and wrote about and this object was about its apparent negative nature (that I thought it represented something that did not happen) rather than its very essence (a flying machine would fit well into a technological and industrial story)?

The reply to my questions was to be found on the internet. Historians are wary of the internet because it can be difficult to assess the accuracy of the information it provides. By contrast historians use footnotes profusely, to make evident the process of scientific validation of each piece of information. In the last few years, however, this state of things has started to change: an increasing amount of material that complies with scientific standards and academic rigour can be found on the internet. In my case, I did not need to find more information on a topic (the Industrial Revolution, for instance), but on an object. Google showed that indeed the web knew about it, and it drove me straight to the website that I use to source images for Industrial Revolution lectures: the Science and Society Picture Library of the Science Museum.⁴⁶ The Science Museum online catalogue of images made it clear that my print was not unique, and it provided a rather entertaining story about it.

The Aerial Steam Carriage was the 'invention' of a certain William Samuel Henson (1812–1888). Henson had taken out a patent for a flying machine in 1843, thus confirming that my print was indeed from the mid-nineteenth century. It was easy enough to check his name on *The Times Online* where there is an article on Henson from 1841.⁴⁷ The database *The Making of the Modern World* revealed other references to Henson and his Aerial Steam Carriage in the *Mechanics' Magazine* of 1843, the *Scientific American* of 1848 and a plate in John Pennington's *Aerostation* (c.1838) that looked uncannily like Henson's later invention.⁴⁸ More information and images were to be found on Wikipedia and a couple of other specialist websites from where the relevance and scale of my finding became apparent.⁴⁹

Henson was an imaginative man and came from a family with substantial technological and industrial expertise as his father owned a lace-making business in Somerset. His technological dream, however, went beyond the textile world as, in his twenties, he put considerable effort and money into developing a patent for what

What Henson did was to make an idea real. He was well aware of the fact that the translation of his patent into a prototype was not simply a matter of correct technical application, but depended mostly on a feasible business plan. And this was what he wanted to create. He did so not just by visualizing his machine, but also by explaining it. *The Times* reported that Henson's invention was 'a matter of little less than certainty' and described the aeroplane as 150 feet long by 30 feet wide with a tail 50 feet in length and a propeller 20 feet in diameter.⁵⁴ *The Times* hailed Henson a 'first and true inventor' and made his idea even more palpable by indulging in

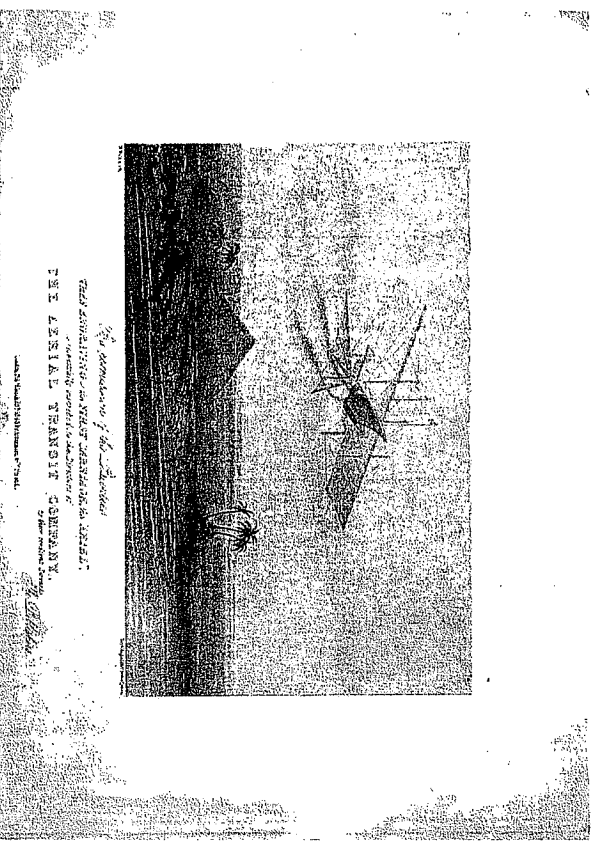


Figure 1.7 'The Aerial Transit Company: By Permission of the Patentees'. Colour print, London, published by Ackerman & Co., the Strand, 28 March 1843. Science Museum, London, inv. 1938-0296.

precise technical descriptions of a condenser producing 20 horse power and the technology for take-off and landing. The article concluded with the cheerful hope 'of what will be the changes, commercial, social and political, which the possession of this new-born power will necessarily bring about'.⁵⁵ It is probable that Henson did not disdain even the sarcastic and colourful report made in *Punch*, that 'it is understood that the first line to be established is that to India, the carriages leaving the top of the Monument, Fish Street Hill, every morning, and taking five minutes at the summit of the Great Pyramids for refreshments'.⁵⁶ This gave body to his ideas of achievement.

Methodologies: recasting narratives beyond positivism

My fortuitous encounter with a 50 pence cut-image led me to research on a nineteenth-century inventor. My artefact acquired meaning by contextualizing it within its one small narrative, and by analysing it next to other similar artefacts. The more I discovered about the aerial steam carriage, the more I realized that it was part of a wider 'story' of invention, personal dreams, public imagination and eventual failure. But it was also a story that had several of the ingredients that are commonly present in the narrative of the Industrial Revolution: a machine, a business plan, and the vision of progress so aptly conveyed in the pages of national newspapers.

Two methodological problems seem to me evident in linking this object (and all others belonging to the same story) and the narrative of the Industrial Revolution. First, the print was not necessarily either a source through which to study the Industrial Revolution (*history from things*), nor the subject topic on which to write about (*history of things*). I had tried instead to juxtapose this object to a narrative, putting object and narrative on a par (*history and things*). Object and narrative are both interested in explaining the past, though in different ways. The previously mentioned methodology of 'the social life of things', but also the approach based on the 'biography' of material objects, have attempted to dissociate straightforward connections between artefacts and history and create more methodologically sophisticated relationships between the two.⁵⁷

I would like to confine myself only to one, though major, consequence of this juxtaposition between history and things: the problem of positivism in research. As I stated earlier, the Industrial Revolution is normally explained by providing evidence (new sources, new statistics, more qualitative materials, new concepts, etc.). So much so, that a concept is transformed into something that can be pinned down into individual elements. Rarely do historians discuss what was not achieved by the Industrial Revolution: the world of the impossible, what was aspired to, or what was imagined.⁵⁸ Material culture would run into the same problem if it was used just as a source or as the subject matter for historical analysis: it would tend to make only positive (though hopefully open) statements. A more flexible relationship between history and objects is needed both to recast narratives (in my case now seeing the Industrial Revolution as not just what was possible and was achieved, but also as what was impossible and imagined) and rethink methodologies (investing the Industrial Revolution through positive as well as negative evidence).

From object to object

I was content enough by this explanation and by possessing an object that I could now understand and contextualize within a narrative of an 'Industrial Revolution that never happened'. It was by chance that I found a three-dimensional artefact. I had started with an object and concluded my amateur research with another. While writing about design copyright for cotton textiles, I came across a 'Design for a pocket handkerchief' reproduced in an article by David Greysmith and representing Henson's machine.⁵⁹ The author reproduced the design for a plate print now at the National Archives at Kew.⁶⁰ I therefore checked with curators at the Victoria and Albert Museum, the Airplane Museum of Scotland and the Science Museum. The latter has in its collection what is probably the only surviving example of a pocket handkerchief produced from the plate (Figure 1.8). One can only imagine the pleasure of Mr Henson to see his flying machine going 'to China in Twenty-Four Hours Certain'.

Conclusion

How do we connect artefacts with the universal aspirations of history? This essay has argued against the naïve idea that objects should simply be inserted within

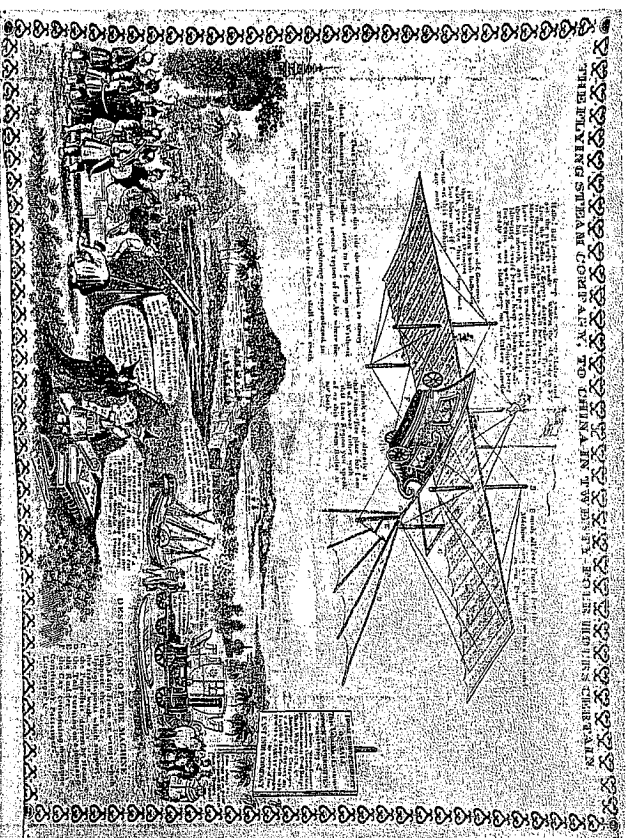


Figure 1.8 'The Flying Steam Company, to China in Twenty-Four Hours Certain'. Cotton handkerchief with sepia brown ink. Science Museum, London, inv. 1938-0295.

historically determined contexts. This would make them redundant, or at best illustrative. I have supported instead the idea that historians should position objects in a dialogue with methodologies and narratives. I have shown that in the same way in which historians mobilize different methodologies and different types of narratives and concepts, so there are highly different ways in which objects relate to history. At first sight the difficulty of connecting objects with narratives could be seen as a problem of size: while objects make small statements, narratives tend to do the opposite. Yet I prefer to see the challenge in another way. At stake is the very nature of the subject of history. Historians tend to present history as a well-woven tablecloth, covering all corners. Objects show how history is instead a rather loosely woven net that sometimes retains – but often is unable to 'catch' – concepts, people, events and explanations. Material artefacts with their multifarious meanings, their innate opaqueness and their difficult heuristic nature remind us that history is always producing but has still a great deal more to do before covering all the corners of human experience.

Notes

- 1 'Old English bedsteads', *Apollo*, 41 (1945), pp. 150–1; A. Rowand, 'Some early English sea service buttons', *The Connoisseur*, 79 (1927), pp. 90–100.
- 2 Leora Auslander, 'Beyond Words', *American Historical Review*, 110 (2006), p. 1015.
- 3 Richard Grassby, 'Material Culture and Cultural History', *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, 35 (2005), pp. 591–603.
- 4 This is true to the point of seeing material culture as interchangeable with consumption. See for instance the review article by Dominique Poulot, 'Une nouvelle histoire de la culture materiale?', *Revue d'Histoire Moderne et Contemporaine*, 44 (1997), pp. 344–57. For a broader and more methodologically nuanced analysis of objects, text and representation see Auslander, 'Beyond Words'.
- 5 Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, *The Age of Hometown: Objects and Stories in the Creation of an American Myth* (New York: Knopf, 2001); Lorna Weatherill, *Consumer Behaviour and Material Culture in Britain, 1660–1760* (London: Routledge, 1988).
- 6 On this see Jules D. Prown, *Art as Evidence: Writings on Art and Material Culture* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2001). See also W. David Kingery (ed.), *Learning from Things: Method and Theory of Material Culture Studies* (Washington and London: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1996).
- 7 Interview with Mrs Maynard, finder, Nether Wallop, Hampshire, UK. Interviewed 4 March 2002. <http://www.concealedgarments.org/research/oral/maynard.html>
- 8 Dinah Eastop, 'Material Culture in Action: Conserving Garments Deliberately Concealed Within Buildings', *Annals of the Museum Paulista*, 15 (2007), p. 195. See also Gabriella Barbieri, 'Memoirs of an 18th Century Stonemason: A Strategy for Documenting the Multiple Object Biographies of a Once-concealed Garment', unpublished MA dissertation, Winchester School of Art, University of Southampton, 2003.
- 9 Dinah Eastop and Charlotte Dev, 'Context and Meaning Generation: The Conservation of Garments Deliberately Concealed Within Buildings', in David Saunders, Joyce H. Townsend and Sally Woodcock (eds), *The Object in Context: Crossing Conservation Boundaries: Contributions to the Munich Congress, 28 August–1 September 2006* (London: International Institute for Conservation of Historic and Artistic Works, 2006), p. 17.
- 10 June Swann, 'Shoes Concealed in Buildings', *Costume: The Journal of the Costume Society*, 30 (1996), pp. 59–69.

- 11 See the Deliberately Concealed Garments Project, Winchester School of Art, University of Southampton, UK: <http://www.concealedgarments.org>.
 - 12 Dinah Eastop, 'Outside In: Making Sense of the Deliberate Concealment of Garments Within Buildings', *Textile: The Journal of Cloth and Culture*, 4 (2006), pp. 246–7.
 - 13 Arjun Appadurai, *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986).
 - 14 As done for instance by Hans Medick, 'Une culture de la considération. Les vêtements et leurs couleurs à Laichingen entre 1750 et 1820', *Annales, Histoire, Sciences Sociales*, 50 (1995), pp. 753–74. See also Michel Pastoureau's analyses of the social meaning of colour: *Bleu: histoire d'une couleur* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 2000).
 - 15 One can cite the relevant literature on the corset as an example. Another area is the investigation of the construction of homosexual identity through apparel, mostly carried out through the means of ethnographic analysis of the use of clothing. Particularly exciting work has been done by integrating dress and literary studies. See Catherine Richardson (ed.), *Clothing Culture, 1350–1650* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004), in particular the Introduction, pp. 1–25; and Chloe Wigston Smith, 'Materializing the Eighteenth Century: Dress History, Literature, and Interdisciplinary Study', *Literature Compass*, 3 (2006), pp. 967–72.
 - 16 Judy Attfield, *Wild Things: The Material Culture of Everyday Life* (Oxford: Berg, 2000), p. 132.
 - 17 Ewa Domanska, 'The Material Presence of the Past', *History and Theory*, 45 (2006), p. 338. Historians are now keen to construct narratives that are more careful in balancing the agency of people and things. This does not mean that inanimate objects should be given agency per se, but that historians should unravel the way in which the interaction between person, object and language constructs historical meaning.
 - 18 Gabriella Barbieri, 'The Role of X-radiography in the Documentation and Investigation of an Eighteenth Century Multi-layered Stomacher', in Sonia O'Connor and Mary M. Brook (eds), *X-Radiography of Textiles, Dress and Related Objects* (Oxford: Elsevier, 2007), pp. 203–11.
 - 19 Eastop, 'Material Culture in Action', p. 195.
 - 20 Matthew Johnson, *An Archaeology of Capitalism* (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1996).
 - 21 I have used here some of the questions proposed by Colin Platt in his *The Great Rebuilding of Tudor and Stuart England: Revolutions in Architectural Taste* (London: UCL Press, 1994), especially in the Preface and Chapter 1.
 - 22 Ercole Sori, *Il rovescio della produzione: i rifiuti in età pre-industriale e paleotecnica* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1999).
 - 23 See Renata Ago, *Il gusto delle cose: una storia degli oggetti nella Roma del Seicento* (Rome: Donzelli Editore, 2006); Lena Orlin, 'The Textual Life of Things', paper presented at the conference 'Everyday Objects: Medieval and Early Modern Material Culture and its Meanings', the Shakespeare Institute, Stratford-upon-Avon, 27–30 June 2007.
 - 24 The field of history of consumption is not a field with fixed boundaries: in France historians use the label 'history of everyday life' (which includes consumption and more) in the United Kingdom there is also the field of history of retailing and shopping (which could be seen as part of history of consumption). The more recent use of the label 'history of material culture' seems to imply wider definitions beyond the act of purchase and consumption of commodities. For an overview see John Brewer and Roy Porter (eds), *Consumption and the World of Goods* (London: Routledge, 1993). See also the incisive article by Craig Clunas, 'Modernity Global and Local: Consumption and the Rise of the West', *American Historical Review*, 104 (1999), pp. 1497–511.
 - 25 History of consumption, however, is not the only type of history of things. One should also mention other fields, such as history of design, history of architecture or history of fashion, in which material objects play a key role.
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- 26 On the issue of interdisciplinarity and the role of art history in renaissance scholarship see: Curtis Perry, 'Introduction', in Curtis Perry (ed.), *Material Culture and Cultural Materialisms in the Middle Ages and Renaissance* (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols, 2001), pp. xii–xiii.
 - 27 And, as Ann Smart Martin observes, the study of consumerism is 'a large umbrella under which many areas of scholarship can rest'. Ann Smart Martin, 'Makers, Buyers, and Users: Consumerism as a Material Culture Framework', *Winterthur Portfolio*, 28 (1993), p. 143.
 - 28 Neil McKendrick, John Brewer and J.H. Plumb, *The Birth of a Consumer Society: The Commercialization of Eighteenth Century England* (London: Europa, 1982). I would like to underline how the excellent book by Joan Thirksk had already shaped the debate, though in a very different way from McKendrick et al.: Joan Thirksk, *Economic Policy and Projects: the Development of a Consumer Society in Early Modern England* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1978).
 - 29 Thorstein Veblen, *Theory of the Leisure Class* (orig. edn 1909; New York: Random House, 2001).
 - 30 See in particular Ben Fine and Ellen Leopold, 'Consumerism and the Industrial Revolution', *Social History*, 15 (1990), pp. 151–79.
 - 31 Weatherill, *Consumer Behaviour*.
 - 32 See for instance: Maxine Berg, 'In Pursuit of Luxury: Global History and British Consumer Goods in the Eighteenth Century', *Past and Present*, 182 (2004), pp. 85–142; Jeremy Prestholdt, 'On the Global Repercussions of East African Consumerism', *American Historical Review*, 109 (2004), pp. 75–82. For an overview: Peter N. Stearns, *Consumerism in World History: The Global Transformation of Desire* (London and New York: Routledge, 2001).
 - 33 <http://www.apva.org/nex/c/bart.html>.
 - 34 It was once thought that the high-quality Wan Li porcelain was produced only for the Chinese elite. The recovery of the 1613 shipwreck *White Leeuw* in 1976 in the Chinese Sea, in which 40 Wan Li wine cups were found, suggested that these items were also traded to Europe. The Jamestown finding confirmed it. See Christine L. van der Pijl-Ketel (ed.), *The Ceramic Load of the 'White Leeuw'* (Amsterdam: Rijksmuseum, 1982), and J.B. Curtis, 'Chinese Ceramics and the Dutch Connections in Early Seventeenth Century Virginia', *Vereniging van Vrienden der Aziatische Kunst Amsterdam*, 1 (1985), pp. 6–13.
 - 35 Berg, 'In Pursuit of Luxury', p. 84.
 - 36 Ibid., p. 118; Robert Finlay, 'The Pilgrim Art: The Culture of Porcelain in World History', *Journal of World History*, 9 (1998), p. 168.
 - 37 See for instance Robert Bachelot, 'On the Movement of Porcelain: Rethinking the Birth of Consumer Society as Interactions of Exchange Networks, 1600–1750', in John Brewer and Frank Trentmann (eds), *Consuming Cultures, Global Perspectives: Historical Trajectories, Transnational Exchanges* (Oxford and New York: Berg, 2006), pp. 95–121.
 - 38 Beverly Straube and Nicholas Lucketti, *1995 Interim Report*, APVA Jamestown Rediscovery (1996), 20, Figure 2.
 - 39 Maura Rinaldi, *Kraak Porcelain: A Moment in the History of Trade* (London: Bamboo, 1989). See also Julia B. Curtis, 'Chinese Export Porcelain in Eighteenth-century Tidewater Virginia', *Studies in Eighteenth-Century Culture*, 17 (1987), pp. 119–44; and John Spargo, *Early American Pottery and China* (Rutland, Vermont: Charles E. Tuttle, 1985).
 - 40 See the Jamestown Rediscovery website: <http://www.apva.org/nex/c/bart.html>.
 - 41 For a theoretical perspective see Robert J. Foster, 'Tracking globalization: commodities and value in motion', in Christopher Tilley, Webb Keane, Susanne Kitchler, Mike Rowlands and Patricia Spyer (eds) *Handbook of Material Culture*, London: Sage, 2006, pp. 285–301.

- 42 I think that quantitative analyses in the study of material culture should not be easily dismissed. A single object does not tell us how common or rare it was. The three statements: (i) 'Chinese porcelain were widely available on the Dutch market in 1602-4'; (ii) 'Ten million pieces of Chinese porcelain were available on the Dutch market in 1602-4'; and (iii) 'Five pieces of Chinese porcelain for every Dutch citizen were available in 1602-4' are all correct but vary widely in their precision and implications.
- 43 Strabe and Luckett, *1995 Interim Report*, pp. 20-1. I would like to thank Ann Smart Martin for pointing out this important fact to me. Ann Smart Martin, 'A Cream-coloured Revolution in Eighteenth-century British America', unpublished paper presented at workshop on 'Ceramic Day', University of Warwick, Waddesdon Manor, 22 June 2007.
- 44 F.D. Klingender, *Art and the Industrial Revolution* (London: Noel Carrington, 1947).
- 45 See in particular Michale Fores, 'The Myth of a British Industrial Revolution', *History*, 6 (1981), pp. 181-98. In defence of the Industrial Revolution, see Maxine Berg and Pat Hudson, 'Rehabilitating the Industrial Revolution', *Economic History Review*, 45 (1992), pp. 24-50.
- 46 <http://www.scienceandsociety.co.uk/>.
- 47 *The Times*, 30 March 1841. A further piece is in the *Pictorial Times*, 1 April 1843.
- 48 *The Mechanics' Magazine, Museum, Register, Journal and Gazette*, 38 (1843), pp. 317-28; John H. Pennington, *Aerostation: or, Steam Aerial Navigation*, s.l. (1838), plate 1.
- 49 <http://www.flyingmachines.org/hens.html>; <http://www.cite.monash.edu.au/hargrave/stringfellow.html>; http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/First_flying_machine.
- 50 The Science Museum in London has a model (in scale 1:7) of Henson's 'aerial steam carriage'. This was produced in 1845-47 by John Stringfellow. Unsuccessful trials were attempted, but in 1847 Henson migrated to the United States. Science Museum, no. 1907-0029.
- 51 The National Archives, Kew, London: Patent of Invention, no. 9478, 1842.
- 52 These were commissioned by Henson's publicist Frederick Marriott: Published by Rock & Co. (c.1843), Library of Congress, ref. LOT 13416, no. 37 (London); engraving by J. Shury (1843), Science and Society Picture Library, ref. 10219018 (Lakeside); lithograph by W.L. Walton (1843), Science and Society Picture Library, ref. 10304405 (Industrial town); the identification of Rome is not certain; lithograph, anonymous, Science and Society Picture Library, ref. 10304402 (Rome).
- 53 The 'Indian' print shows a plane mid-flight and another taking off from a launching ramp constructed on a tower where passengers should have been given permit to board. The exotic nature of the setting is also conveyed through the presence of an elephant: <http://www.flyingmachines.org/hens.html>
- 54 *The Times*, 30 March 1841.
- 55 Ibid.
- 56 Ibid. A further print shows the aerial steam carriage flying over the pyramids. The text says 'as proposed to go to India in Four Days'. Published in London by J.T. Wood, Monash University, 2750.
- 57 See for instance Janet Hoskins, 'Introduction', in Janet Hoskins (ed.) *Biographical Objects: How Things Tell the Stories of People's Lives* (New York and London: Routledge, 1998), pp. 1-24.
- 58 For a very successful attempt to reconstruct the cultural history of the early railways beyond the narrow confines of evidence-led research see James Taylor, 'Business in Pictures: Representations of Railway Enterprise in the Satirical Press in Britain, 1845-1870', *Past and Present*, 189 (2005), pp. 111-46.
- 59 David Greysmith, 'Patterns, Pracy and Protection in the Textile Printing Industry 1787-1850', *Textile History*, 14 (1983), p. 171.
- 60 TNA: BT 43 191, Class 10 (Dress), design 7185, May 1843: design for a pocket handkerchief, registered by Geo. Faulkner, Parker St, Manchester.

2 Ornament as evidence

Andrew Morrall

This chapter will examine some of the ways architectural and domestic ornament intersected with social, political, religious and intellectual life in sixteenth-century Northern Europe. The intention is to use a set of period-specific case studies to establish ornament less as a branch of the 'decorative arts' than as a mode of visual address, which embodied and was often intended to proclaim definable social, political, ideological or cultural values. The ambition is to claim the visual sphere of ornament as a medium of cultural and social experience, and to suggest that its study can offer important evidence for understanding early modern *mentalities* as much as other provinces of culture, which are traditionally apprehended and examined by historians via documents and texts. The underlying assumption is that ornament, like speech or other forms of literary discourse, was a language of some flexibility that contemporaries used to project a social identity, a civil or domestic ideal, or a religious or ethical aspect of themselves, and by which they could proclaim adherence to a social group or a particular set of values, or conversely differentiate themselves from others.

The idea therefore is to take the study of ornament out of a narrowly 'art historical' context and to align it more with the interests of social and cultural history. Some of the methods and approaches to the material used here belong necessarily to art history and may be less familiar to historians used to dealing more exclusively with texts. The starting point of the enquiry is a set of questions about the character, iconographic tradition, production, function and reception of the ornamental imagery applied to a number of varying objects; the primary task throughout, in other words, is to interpret and explain the objects themselves. Yet, in doing so, the argument will move outwards from a close consideration of the structure and meaning of a particular ornamental form, to consider how it operated within society: Who used it? How? To what purpose? And, equally, what resistance, if any, was there towards its adoption, and from whom? If the ambition of the essay is to demonstrate how surviving ornamental programmes showed how people constructed the world, by what mental constructs they defined it, how they invested it with meaning, and with what registers of emotion they infused it, then the approach comes close to that of the cultural, social or literary historian, who does the same with ideas or with texts; and the methods of cultural analogy or the application of such concepts as *habitus* that are used here are drawn from their disciplines. A fur-

10 The case of the missing footstool

Reading the absent object

Glenn Adamson

One of the key problems in the study of material culture is the phenomenon of loss. Indeed, when it comes to the material past, disappearance is the norm, and preservation is the exception. This fact is widely recognized by historians, who have tried to study the way that uneven rates of survival create a false picture of the past – in terms of class, gender, geography and ethnic identity – often working with archaeologists and literary scholars in order to draw a more accurate picture. Alteration, a subcategory of loss, also presents many obstacles for interpretation. Surviving objects may have acquired new parts or a new surface; and of course by the time we come to study any material thing, it will invariably have been recontextualized. Even in those rarest of circumstances when an object still sits in the very spot for which it was originally intended, perhaps in the perfectly intact room of a magically well-preserved country house, in the moment when we walk into its presence we have created a new encounter.

These various forms of absence are central to the study of material culture, and it is imperative to bear them in mind. But there is another sense in which historical objects may be ‘missing’. This is when they are absent not only in the present day, but seemingly in the historical record as well. When scholars look at the past, they look above all for patterns – shapes that are disposed across time, space and cultures. Much of modern museology has been premised on the reconstruction of such patterns. Here a point made to me by Craig Clunas, formerly a curator of Chinese art at the Victoria and Albert Museum, is worth relating. He was describing to me the creation of the ceramics collection at the museum, which today numbers in the many thousands of examples. The strategy employed by the institution’s early curators was a comprehensive one, so that (for example) they set out to collect a sample of every significant porcelain manufactory in England. This accomplished, they then began to gather examples of each manufactory’s early, middle and late periods where possible, and then every form known to have been produced by each manufactory. Clunas drew the story to a close by pointing out the obvious: every time the curators made an acquisition, they made their job exponentially more difficult, for in filling the ‘hole’ in the collection with a new object they succeeded only in creating new ‘holes’ on every side of it.

The moral of this story is that discerning patterns in history is an act of selective will. But there is also a narrower, and perhaps more useful, point to make: isolating

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the gaps within a pattern is a vital part of the process of writing history. While the V&A’s curators thought they were constructing a complete history of English porcelain through the acquisition of objects, it was actually in identifying the salient ‘holes’ in the collection that the curators really made their decisions. With this in mind, we might ask: ‘What if absence in the historical record were to be treated not as a problem to be overcome, but rather as a matter of historical interest in its own right?’ This chapter will consider this possibility through the consideration of one example: the eighteenth-century British domestic footstool, an object that seems to have gone missing in a most suggestive fashion.

Setting the scene

We know for certain that the eighteenth-century British public was aware of such a thing as a footstool for domestic use. A particularly prominent depiction of one appears in ‘The Tête à Tête’, the second painting in William Hogarth’s famous satirical cycle of paintings *Marriage à la Mode* (1743) (Figure 10.1). The scene is set in the lavishly decorated home of a young Viscount and his new wife, who are seated to either side of a fireplace liberally decorated with Chinese ornaments. All is not well. A distraught servant exits to the right carrying a bill of expenses that one senses may go unpaid, but the couple are unconcerned. It has clearly been a hard night of carousing and gambling (to judge by the dishevelled card table in the background). The nattily attired Viscount stretches out his legs disconsolately, his



Figure 10.1 William Hogarth, *Marriage à la Mode*, Plate II, 1745. Etching and engraving on paper. H 38.1 cm x W 46.3 cm. V&A F.118.2.1; Forster Bequest. Courtesy of Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

sword lying in pieces at his feet and a lady's cap (presumably not his wife's) peeking out from his pocket. We notice the cap thanks to a sniffing dog, who is perched on a small gilt footstool with red upholstery. The Viscount does not actually prop his feet up on the little piece of furniture but, like every other detail in Hogarth's painting, it helps to underpin a narrative of impending disaster: even as these young people's affairs are spinning dangerously out of control, all they want to do is put their feet up.

'The Tête à Tête' serves as an apt introduction to the study of the footstool, which, as this chapter will go on to argue, was no less important to eighteenth-century Britain for being absent. After seeing Hogarth's painting, we might, as historians of material culture, want to find a real footstool of the period, to see if it bears any similarity to the one in the image. We might want to find out who owned such objects. Were they, as Hogarth implies, signs of conspicuous consumption and excessive spending? Or were they more common than that, a fixture of the middling British home? How were they made? Were there various levels of expense and refinement available to the prospective footstool owner? Such questions are routinely asked of other object types, often with a great deal of success. But in the case of the footstool, one comes up empty. It has proven impossible (for this writer, anyway) to locate a single surviving British domestic footstool that can be securely dated much before 1800. This could be because of their small size and seemingly marginal role within the interior, of course – perhaps their scarcity today is a straightforward case of attrition. But there are also surprisingly few references to footstools in period documents. Samuel Johnson's 1755 *Dictionary of the English Language* duly defined the term – a 'stool on which he that sits places his feet' – but usage in texts of the period is limited almost entirely to a religious context. The resonant Biblical phrase 'sit thou on my right hand, until I make thine enemies thy footstool' (Psalms, cx. 1) was cited and paraphrased extensively in the period, as was a figure of speech in which the earthly world was described as God's footstool.¹ But there is scarcely any evidence in inventories, diaries, fiction or published descriptions of homes that makes mention of the form in use.

The only context in which the footstool was used consistently in Britain prior to the nineteenth century was at court, particularly in royal and ecclesiastical ceremonies. Several important examples survive, such as the throne and footstool of the Archbishop William Juxon, who was canonized in 1661, which are preserved with their original upholstery in the Victoria and Albert Museum; or a similar set for the coronation of Queen Anne in 1702, which survives at Hatfield House.² (In some cases a simple cushion, rather than a piece of furniture with a frame, was used for the purpose.) Courtly usage, however, might best be considered as the exception that proves the rule. In the artificial, ritualized and historically resonant surroundings of an event like a royal coronation, the footstool could take on an emblematic role precisely because it was distinctive. A description dating from 1727 gives the flavour:

In the meantime the King rises from his Devotions, and goes to the Altar, supported as before, and attended by the Lord Great Chamberlain ... And King

Edward's Chair, with a Footstool before it, being placed in the midst of the Area or Sacristium before the Altar, and being covered over with Cloth of Gold, his Majesty seats himself in it.³

The tradition of using a footstool to signify rulership goes far back in history, and is not limited to European cultures. As the Biblical passages cited above suggest, the presence of a footstool suggests domination – the symbolism is only a short step away from a medieval representation of an angel with his feet upon a devil, or St George standing triumphant atop a dragon. Such long-standing symbolic use of footstools could be said to make the domestic footstool only more conspicuous by its absence.

This absence is doubly remarkable because, just after the turn of the nineteenth century, footstools seem to have suddenly become nearly omnipresent in the British interior. Jane West's prescriptive book *Letters to a Young Lady*, which offered instructions on matters ranging from etiquette to morality, inveighed against the 'folly of fashionable ostentation' that seemed to her to have become all too common of late among 'the middle classes of life':

[I]t becomes an undertaking of no little skill, to conduct one's person through an apartment twelve feet square, furnished in style by a lady of taste, without any injury to ourselves, or to the fauteuils, candelabras, console tables, jardinières, chiffonniers, &c. Should we, at entering the apartment, escape the workboxes, footstools, and cushions for lapdolls, our debut may still be celebrated by the overthrow of half a dozen top-gallant screens, as many perfume jars, or even by the total demolition of a glass cabinet stuck full of stuffed monsters.⁴

West might not be a reliable source, since she is writing in a censorious and exaggerated tone. But inventories also attest to the presence of footstools in British and American homes during the first decade of the nineteenth century, occasionally located in the dining room but most often in the drawing room, itself a new type of space within the middle-class home.⁵ There are other types of evidence, too: letters, like one written by Theresa Villiers to a friend in 1805, expressing thanks for the present of a footstool;⁶ images, like Andy Buck's sentimental 1808 print 'Daring Awake', which shows a woman in an Empire dress dandling a child on her knee, and employs a footstool as a synecdoche (that is, a metaphorical stand-in) for the domestic setting itself.⁷ And there are plenty of surviving objects as well, mostly in the neoclassical Regency style that flourished in the early part of the century. Some of these, like a pair of footstools (now in the Metropolitan Museum of Art) made by the leading New York cabinemaker Duncan Phyfe, were made *en suite* with a matching sofa and chairs, suggesting that the footstool was becoming a standard part of the well-appointed home. After 1800, then, the footstool seems to have been a common enough feature of the British domestic interior. Why was it missing until then – and what might account for its sudden arrival on the scene?

A short history of putting one's feet up

Methodologically speaking, the best thing to do when faced with an unexpected 'hole' in the historical record is to look at the edges of the perceived gap, in the hope of delineating its precise contours, and thus some way of guessing at the reasons behind it. As it turns out, there are several interesting discoveries to be made about the missing footstool through this strategy – each of which makes the case seem even more intriguing.

A first step might be to consider objects that are similar to our absent object, but lack its precise use or connotations. So, what other small-scale items populated the floor in an eighteenth-century household? The most common forms of seating in the seventeenth century, and in some rural areas well into the nineteenth, were the form (a long, simple bench) and the joint or board stool (not to be confused with the footstool, this was a low, backless seat, usually lacking upholstery). In wealthier interiors, seating was again mostly backless, with an upholstered seat and sometimes a separate cushion. The French referred to this form as a *tabouret*, and the English simply called it a 'stool' (meaning 'seat', and etymologically linked to the German *Stuhl*). Until the late seventeenth century, only the most significant person present in a gathering – perhaps the patriarch of the household – would be seated in a chair as we would now use that term. This would have been a substantial piece of furniture with a high back and arms, either turned or carved, and often upholstered. In a courtly context such a seat might be described as a throne, but typically it was called a 'great chair', and most homes would have had only one. It was not until the proliferation of cheaply built cane chairs in London and the Netherlands in the late seventeenth century that households tended to have multiple seats with backs. Though lightly and quickly built, these cane chairs were an improvement in terms of comfort, because they raked slightly backwards and often had cushions tied on to their seat frames. Thus our own idea of sitting as an activity that involves reclining to a degree, and certainly as a posture that would permit resting one's feet upon a lower stool or cushion, is actually of relatively recent vintage.

Does this mean, then, that people did not put their feet up before the beginning of the nineteenth century? This is exactly the sort of question that written documents tend not to answer for the historian, but we can resort to the examination of surviving artefacts; for, despite the missing footstool, there are convincing material indications that people did indeed sit with their feet up off the floor. The most pervasive such evidence is the presence of wear on the front stretchers (the horizontal braces that run sideways between a chair's front legs) on seventeenth- and eighteenth-century seating (Figure 10.2). This is particularly striking to the modern viewer because few chairs nowadays have stretchers at all – they began to disappear from seating in the middle of the eighteenth century (an elimination made possible by improvements to the strength of the joints of chairs at the seat). When chairs did have stretchers, however, we should imagine that people tended to sit with their knees lifted, heels tucked securely on a wooden perch. This attitude was suggestive not so much of relaxation as activity. With the knees drawn up, the lap was rendered a convenient surface for eating, sewing or reading.

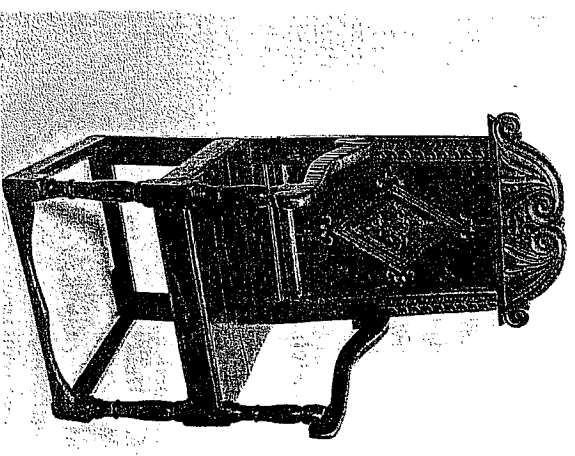


Figure 10.2 Armchair, England, 1675–1700. Oak and elm, with carving and turning. H 115 cm × W 57 cm × D 55.5 cm. V&C CIRC. 214–1911. Courtesy of Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

A similar point might be made about another type of object that comes quite close to the footstool: the footwarmer. This was a common domestic accoutrement in the seventeenth century and seems to have seen continued use in the eighteenth. It developed first in the Netherlands, and many Dutch genre paintings show footwarmers in use. One travelling British writer, clearly unfamiliar with the form, found it to be worthy of extended comment:

The portable Stoves universally used both by the Men and Women of these Provinces, are extremely convenient. It is a little square wooden Box, within which there is a small earthen Pan with a Bit of lighted Turf in it. The Stove has a Door, which is shut when the Pan is put in it, and Holes on the Top, on which People place their Feet by way of a Foot-stool. By this contrivance they keep themselves gently warm the whole Winter's Day either by Land or Water; for with this little portable Equipage they travel, sit behind their Counters, and at Church, from which the coldest Day in Winter does not detain them. If the Turf be good, it keeps in two or three Hours, and when it is burnt out, they renew it.⁸

As this passage indicates, the footwarmer, like a chair's front stretcher, was not used in a spirit of relaxation but rather to better enable the sitter to work or perform some other activity, such as riding in a carriage or sitting quietly in a stone-cold church.

A final form that should be mentioned in relation to the footstool is the charmingly named 'cricket' (or sometimes 'cricket stool'), a small piece of furniture with a round top and turned legs. These must have been extremely common in the eighteenth century, but they were so small and inexpensive (and so dispensable) that few securely datable to the period survive. In any case, despite their small scale, crickets seem to have been used almost exclusively to sit upon rather than to rest one's feet. They are recorded as seating for children, after they had outgrown high chairs, and also being used by clerks and servants while at work.⁹

'Be always ashamed to catch thyself idle'

The foregoing discussion of cognate forms amounts to a historical argument – tentative, as arguments built largely from surviving material evidence tend to be – that a form of seated posture that we now consider to be absolutely conventional (and comfortable) was unusual and perhaps even unknown until about 1800. What might explain this surprising fact? Here we might return to Hogarth's painting 'The Tête à Tête', and reconsider its moralizing aspects. The eighteenth century was, like most periods in history, a great time for moralizers. A brief tour of the era's prescriptive literature establishes an interesting context for the Viscount's splayed-leg posture. Idleness and indolence were criticized constantly by writers of the period. A text from earlier in the century (sometimes attributed to Daniel Defoe), for example, offered cautionary advice that might almost have been written to caption Hogarth's painting: 'Idle Excursions, vain Diversions, or what's worse, may give a temporary Relaxation; but if God intend them good, they'll find their Troubles recur with Force; as a Current dam'd up a while, rushes with redoubled Violence, the Obstruction once master'd'.¹⁰ The misogynist aspect of Hogarth's painting, too, was reflected in a wide range of texts in the period, in which women's supposed tendency towards excessive consumption was held to place both the household and the national economy at risk. And the *chinoiserie* elements of the interior in 'The Tête à Tête' were meant to read as signifiers of foreign luxuries – a point to which we will return.¹¹

Another great moralizer of the eighteenth century was Benjamin Franklin, whose prescriptive *Poor Richard's Almanack* was first published in 1732, when the future great statesman was still establishing himself as a printer. The *Almanack* became one of the most popular books of the era despite – or perhaps because of – its stern, mordant tone. Aphorisms (some of Franklin's own composition, others borrowed from previous publications) such as 'Trouble springs from idleness and grievous toil from needless ease' and 'Be always ashamed to catch thyself idle' were typical of a text that hectored its reader to remain ever vigilant in the struggle against temptation, idleness and luxury. It so happens that Franklin suffered from gout later in life, a fact that makes another aphorism in the *Almanack* somewhat poignant: 'O Lazy-Bones! Dost thou think God would have given thee Arms and Legs, if he had not design'd thou should'st use them.' This line seems as though it could have been written specifically to chastise the Viscount in 'The Tête à Tête', but it takes on nearly premonitory dimensions when one considers a much later writing of Franklin's entitled *Dialogue Between Franklin and the Gout*. This short,

funny text pits a defensive and hapless Ben against his own painful illness. The personification of gout addresses him in a critical tone not too different from that which Franklin himself had adopted in the *Almanack*:

FRANKLIN. Eh! Oh! Eh! What have I done to merit these cruel sufferings?

GOUT. Many things; you have ate and drank too freely, and too much indulged those legs of yours in their indolence.

Today, with the benefit of modern medicine, we know that gout is caused not by 'indolence' but a build-up of uric acid around the cartilage of the joints. The result is excruciating pain, stiffness, and swelling – nothing to laugh about, really, though this did not prevent eighteenth-century caricaturists and satirists from doing so, mainly because they saw the disease as afflicting the lazy rich who ate too much and exercised too little.¹² Franklin was not above teasing himself on this point:

GOUT. It is a maxim of your own, that 'a man may take as much exercise in walking a mile, up and down stairs, as in ten on level ground.' What an opportunity was here for you to have had exercise in both these ways! Did you embrace it, and how often?

FRANKLIN. I cannot immediately answer that question.

GOUT. I will do it for you; not once.

FRANKLIN. Not once?

GOUT. Even so.

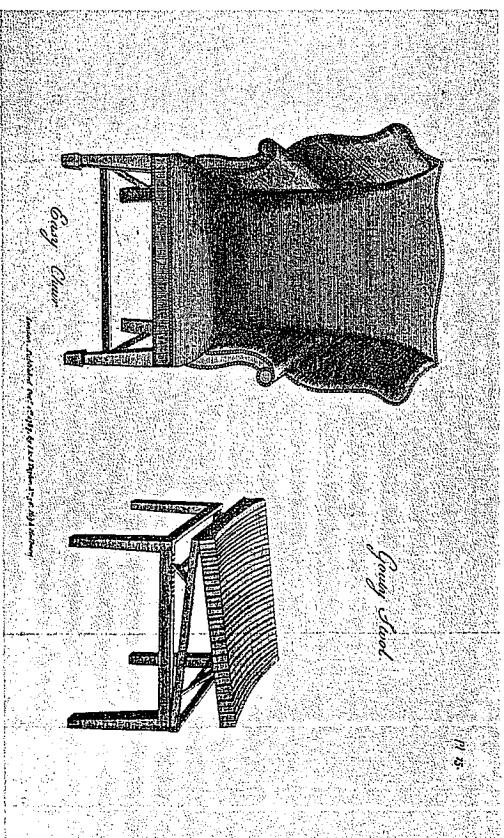


Figure 10.3 George Hepplewhite, *The Cabinet-Maker & Upholsterer's Guide*, 1787, Plate 15. Courtesy of Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

Gout is a useful point of reference for our story about footstools, in part because it served as the basis for moral invective against inactivity, but also because the only time that putting one's feet up was considered appropriate in the eighteenth century was when one suffered from the affliction. The 'gouty stool', a simple wooden frame with a moveable square top, was developed specifically to aid in the comfort of those who suffered from the disease (Figure 10.3). In a neat coincidence, it was only when one brought misfortune upon oneself through idleness that a piece of furniture specifically designed for propping up the feet came into use. (A similar but less morally freighted case is that of the winged or 'easy' chair, which was not used for relaxation when it was first introduced, but rather was intended to support the head of an invalid.)¹⁷ Indeed, in the first painting in Hogarth's *McGrath's Mocking*, entitled 'The Marriage Settlement', we find the Earl of Squander (the Viscount's father) with a bandaged foot propped up on a gilt and upholstered footstool closely comparable to the one in 'The Tête à Tête'. Through the language of objects, Hogarth is foreshadowing the inevitable results of high living.

An aspect of Hogarth's footstools that deserves consideration in this connection is their boldly scrolled Baroque style, which in the 1740s and in the context of this series of paintings would likely have been perceived as French. This is not the only nod to fashions from across the Channel: the Viscount sports shoe-heels made of dyed red leather, which were a sartorial privilege afforded only to the nobility in France. The ridiculous, overly ornamented clock on the wall, which incorporates the figures of a cat, a monkey and a fish, must also have been intended to evoke the elaborate creations of Parisian *mécéniciens*. Hogarth was famously anti-Gallic and lampooned French manners and mannerisms mercilessly in other works (most memorably the print 'A Taste in High Life', in which a skinny gentleman and his portly wife thrill to the delights of a tiny, exquisite teacup). Disapproval of luxury in general, and taking one's ease in particular, was one way that the honest Englishman ('John Bull'), who dined on roast beef and spoke his mind, expressed disdain for the overly refined Frenchman, who ate strange things like frog's legs and was constrained by the ridiculous dictates of fashion.¹⁴ The 'supineness and effeminacy' that many writers correlated with indolence and ill health were often specifically cast in French terms.¹⁵

Nor were furnishings exempt from this logic; as the prominent Bluestocking Elizabeth Montagu wrote in a letter to her husband, 'the manners of an age are certainly expressed by furniture. When a Nation grows effeminate Beds, chairs & couches are made fit for luxurious ease.'¹⁶ Given all these British reservations about the French national character (not to mention the frequent military conflicts between the two countries during the period), it is interesting to discover that, unlike the British, the French did indeed have footstools in the eighteenth century. No less prominent a fashion victim than Marie Antoinette herself is known to have owned one, which like most examples of the French footstool was part of a set of seating furniture made *en suite*.¹⁷ The French also developed other furniture forms specifically dedicated to putting one's feet up, like the 'fauteuil de commodité en bergère' – an armchair with a matching footstool to extend its seat, a form that was also called a *duchesse* or *chaise longue brisée*.¹⁸ Another form called the *récamier*,

a couch with an asymmetrical scrolled arm, came to be a prominent symbol of French classical style and luxury at the end of the century. It was named for Madame Jeanne Françoise Julie Adélaïde Récamier, who favoured reclining in such a piece of furniture. The couch and the woman alike were immortalized in Jacques-Louis David's 1800 portrait, now in the Louvre.¹⁹

Thus it appears that while the British were assiduously avoiding putting their feet up, the French (the aristocratic French, at any rate) were conceiving varied and novel means of doing just that. While this divergence in the matter of personal comportment seems hard to credit, it is worth noting that travellers often remarked upon differences. British travellers to America, for example, pronounced themselves amused by the habit they observed there of tipping back in a chair, which seemed to them curious and possibly dangerous.²⁰ But such encounters with difference were much more striking to Englishmen when they went further afield, culturally speaking, and this brings us, finally, to the emergence of the British domestic footstool.

The term 'ottoman' was often applied to a low seat – not unlike the ones once described as tabourets – but was also used to describe the footstool. The employment of this exotic word may betray a continuity of the unspoken assumptions about luxury, decadence and foreignness that we have explored thus far. The first mention of an ottoman listed in the *Oxford English Dictionary* is in a memorandum book of Thomas Jefferson, who listed payment for an 'ottomane of velours d'Utrecht', a phrase that encapsulates the complex geography of objects at this time – a French form that had acquired the name of the great Near Eastern empire, and was covered with a fabric made in the Netherlands. Like the 'sofa' and the 'divan', two words of Arabic derivation that (like the forms they describe) date earlier in the eighteenth century, the ottoman's introduction to the British interior circa 1800 announced a more horizontal approach to seating. In their early years, all these forms were conceptually tied to dubious French luxury. The sofa, in particular, was associated with moral as well as physical relaxation, having been brought to the attention of many Britons by the English translation of Crébillon fils's scurrilous novel *La Sopha* (1742), set in the Orient, in which the hero is transformed into a piece of furniture and relates the various assignments that he observes as a result.

British writers seized upon the connection between the sofa and sexuality, using it much as Hogarth used his prop footstools to create an atmosphere of impropriety. In 1773, for example, the novelist Richard Graves opened a scene in his novel *The Spiritual Quixote* (a scene, incidentally, also entitled 'Tête à Tête') with the lines: 'The Lady received him in a genteel dishabille [sic], sitting, or rather leaning, on a rich sofa, in such a posture as necessarily displayed an handsome foot, somewhat above the instep.'²¹ It is worth noting that women's shoes, too, were changing at this time, in line with this spirit of alluring display: new 'neoclassical' styles of footwear often revealed the shape of the ankle and foot to an unprecedented degree. The rigidly constructed woman's shoe of the eighteenth century typically had a high heel, a pointed toe and a buckle to fasten it. In the 1790s this style was displaced by a narrower, much more lightly built shoe that tied with laces, and was made with a silk or satin upper. These shoes were so flimsy that they were often bought six or

twelve at a time, and could only be worn a few times before being worn out. As Giorgio Riello has written, 'the famous red heels of Louis XIV gave way to elegant flat shoes, unsuitable for walking but very demonstrative'.²² An 'ottoman' would have performed much the same role as the sofa described in Graves' novel, acting as a platform for the showing off of the newly unconcealed foot.

Three hypotheses

The American art historian Jules Prown, one of the pioneers of material culture theory, has suggested that artefacts from the past might best be interpreted as a psychiatrist would interpret a patient's dreams: 'Perhaps if we had access to a culture's dream world, we could discover and analyse some of [their] hidden beliefs. In the absence of that, I suggest that some of these beliefs are encapsulated in the form of things.'²³ This argument has a certain persuasive force. What a culture takes for granted, or will not allow itself to speak aloud, might be found precisely in those areas that are less self-conscious. But if we are to take Prown's argument seriously – that the material culture scholar is something like an analyst burrowing into a patient's unconscious – then surely what will be most revelatory is that which is literally repressed. A teapot or a table is likely to 'match' written texts of the same period. Connecting the two is never likely to be easy. The German art historian Heinrich Wölfflin wrote over a century ago that 'we have yet to find the way from the scholar's pen to the mason's yard'. All these years later, scholars still struggle to find the links between intellectual and material history.²⁴ The areas of greatest success have normally relied on period discussions about the world of material goods: economics, consumption, taste and aesthetics. This essay adopts a different approach. I have tried to take to heart Prown's contention that the study of material culture, in its purest form, is not simply an adjunct or support for the history of such fields of thought, but is rather a means of getting at cultural content that could be recovered in no other way. Put simply, if we want the study of material culture to unlock the secrets of history, then surely we should be analysing what people of the past did *not* make, what they did *not* do, with as much care as we examine their surviving material traces. Behind every object that has 'gone missing', there is a hidden cause. If we have done our detective work well, then at the bottom of the case of the missing footstool should lie something like a motive.²⁵

Despite the clues we have assembled thus far, it may not be elementary to find this motive. Moving from the specific to the general, finding reasons behind the pattern of material evidence (or absence) requires a leap of induction no easier than the deductive feats of Sherlock Holmes. While I will now be offering three possible explanations for the footstool's absence and its subsequent fashionability, it should be stressed that these are a series of informed guesses – hypotheses – rather than an open-and-shut case.

We might begin with the issue of class. It was a commonplace in the eighteenth century that the lower sorts did not seek to improve their lot when they had the opportunity. Once labourers had enough to subsist on, the conventional thinking ran, they did not seek additional work or income, but rather directed any excess

income they might have into 'luxuries', drink, or other forms of indolent behaviour. This argument was used by economic theorists to justify workers' low wages, and was also consistent with a generally suspicious view of leisure. That suspicion was equally prevalent among the 'polite' or middling sorts, and as we have seen in the example of Hogarth (and, indeed, in the merciless satire of wealthy, overstuffed gout sufferers), such disapprobation was also levelled at the more well-to-do. It was not until the beginning of the nineteenth century that this set of convictions began to reverse itself. In these years, moralizing rhetoric was more likely to present the British proletariat as the hard-working pride of the nation, perhaps deserving of a rest at the end of a long day. This change in attitudes towards luxury was inextricably bound up with the ongoing progress of the Industrial Revolution and the rise of machine-powered manufacture. These processes had begun long before the late eighteenth century, were unevenly distributed across various industries, and were understood very differently by observers at the time.²⁶ Yet it would be difficult to deny that labour's relation to the economy transformed radically during this period. The shift was reflected in many ways: in economic theory (most famously in the work of Adam Smith), which began to frame 'surplus' income and luxury consumption as benefits to the broader society, rather than moral ills; in business practice, which became increasingly orientated to questions of organization as well as production; and, most importantly for our purposes, in changes of attitude towards issues of class and work.²⁷ The sudden fashionability of the footstool, and its implication that relaxation was a normal part of domesticity rather than a privilege of the few, must be seen against this backdrop of change.

Changing attitudes towards sexuality might also help us to understand the emergence of the footstool. As we have seen, despite its seeming innocuousness, the footstool served as a display for a revealed, sexualized foot. This fact takes us in a different direction from that of class, in that the footstool seems to cut against (rather than confirm) our initial expectations about the shift from the eighteenth to the nineteenth century. Michel Foucault has written of a 'repressive hypothesis' that tends to guide thinking about sexuality during modernization. According to this theory, the Victorian age was a period of denial, a moment in history in which the body and its needs were shunted to the side of culture. Thus, the Victorians could see sexual desire as occurring only within contexts then considered to be deviant, such as homosexuality, prostitution and pornography. The exception to the rule was marital sex, which still caused embarrassment for the culture but was religiously sanctioned and expressly devoted to reproduction of the society through childbirth. Foucault disputes this 'repressive hypothesis' by showing the ways in which sexual discourse flourished during the period: in the gendered organization of institutions such as schools (which imply a recognition that desire is ever-present); in the development of medical literature; and in moralizing literature. If the Victorians were so repressed, Foucault asks, why did sexuality perform such a key ordering role in their society? In fact, the Victorians talked and thought about sex all the time. They were not 'repressed', exactly, but rather *displaced* sexual desire continually, most importantly through institutions, as a means of articulating power relations within culture.²⁸ The footstool can be profitably viewed as a detail within

this Foucaultian reading of sexuality. Its staging of an erotogenous zone, the foot, at the very heart of the parlour (itself the symbolic centre of the domestic interior), suggests that a displacement is at work. Sexuality is emphatically *not* repressed here, as it arguably had been in the eighteenth century – when the footstool was present only through its conspicuous absence, as a cautionary talisman. In the nineteenth century, by contrast, the play of desire has been brought front and centre, only to be controlled: as if to demonstrate the efficacy of the familial order in managing a potentially destabilizing force.

A third and final context in which the footstool might be placed is that of Britain's changing relations to the foreign. As in the case of sexuality, the case of the missing footstool may surprise us initially, given our intuitions about the presence of the exotic within British culture. We tend to think of the mid-eighteenth century, the moment of the high rococo, as the apex of orientatizing style, and indeed there is good reason to. The presence of porcelains, japanned furniture and fanciful depictions of Chinese subjects on everything from wallpaper to spice boxes suggests that Britain in the 1750s and 1760s was a culture completely in thrall to the Other. The difference between such rococo *chinoiserie* and the 'luxurious' ottoman, however, is palpable: the difference between the symbolic and the submerged. Though some Chinese forms were taken up by the British in the eighteenth century, mostly for taking tea, they were also seen as expressly, demonstratively Chinese (as the use of the term 'china' to mean porcelain attests). In this sense, tea wares were an extension of the more purely representational approach to the exotic. As David Porter has argued, this moment in the history of orientalism should be seen as a deployment of 'hybrid' forms, which were attractive precisely for their incoherency and sheer difference from prevailing classical norms of taste.²⁹ The footstool is a completely different kettle of fish. It implies a more casual and less fascinated relation with the Other. By 1800 Britain was an imperial power, with extensive and growing holdings around the world. It is clear that the footstool was associated with French (and perhaps kingly) culture, which was perhaps the most important reason for its absence in the eighteenth-century British household. But does the term 'ottoman' signal an Eastern association with the footstool as well? It may be noteworthy that many chairs made in India (Britain's largest colonial possession) during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries were accompanied by matching footstools. But 'ottoman footstools', despite the name, were not designed in an exoticizing manner; they were comfortably in line with the neoclassical style of the time. Perhaps the fact that the ottoman was implicitly associated with Eastern luxury, but was not designed in such a way as to dramatize that relationship, suggests a process of normalization. The footstool, in this case, could be seen as exemplifying a diminishing of anxiety and curiosity alike, a smother and less troubled integration of the foreign into the domestic.

Conclusion

Our three hypotheses suggest not only readings of the footstool in the early nineteenth century, but also its absence in the eighteenth. Collectively, they tell a story

about the inability of a culture to come to terms with certain disquieting phenomena: class struggle, sexual desire, the foreign. This brings us, however, to a final dilemma. Assuming that the contexts just described do help to illuminate the case of the missing footstool, can we say the reverse? Does the footstool's absence, and of the missing footstool, really help us to understand the currents of history that its subsequent emergence, really help us to understand the currents of history that swirl around such issues as class, luxury, sexuality and the exotic? A historian might say no. After all, these larger developments are already well understood. One hardly needs to look at footstools, which offer only tantalizing flickers of resonance with broader historical dynamics, when one can look at Adam Smith and Michel Foucault. And indeed, if one can only make sense of the footstool's fortunes with reference to such 'master' texts, then what is the point of making sense of the footstool at all? What expectations should we have of material culture, as a subject area and as a discipline?

One answer, I think, lies in the issue of *register*, a term with a useful double meaning for the study of material culture. To say that an object 'registers' the larger patterns around it, as a seismograph registers an earthquake, is a nicely open way of suggesting our quarry as historians. The term 'register' also captures the social range of material culture: the fact that it is distributed in shapes that extend across multiple levels of society, and thus permits us to draw interpretive connections across hierarchical boundaries. It is the job of one kind of historian to define the past in terms of ideas and large-scale transformations. Concepts like the Industrial Revolution, discourses of sexuality, exoticism, even 'modernity' itself, are useful because they do have explanatory force. We cannot, in a sense, do without them. Without large-scale conceptual tools, history would be reduced to a stream of mutually unintelligible data points, anecdotes and individual biographies. Yet the Big Ideas also need to be tested constantly, and in every way available. And perhaps this is the job of the material culture historian. Something like a footstool brings history literally down to earth. It is encouraging to find that some of the momentous moral and economic currents of the early nineteenth century were registered within the zones of comportment, of domesticity, of furniture production, and indeed the body itself. Such confirmation helps us to have faith in the Big Ideas, which impose order on the past. But material culture can do more than affirm metanarratives. It also helps us to create a more nuanced picture of history, one with multiple registers – something more like a full symphony than a single line of melody. To return to the metaphor of the detective story, we might say that without the study of material culture, we would have nothing but a series of final, culminating scenes, the bits in which we find out 'whodunnit'. But, as any reader knows, the pleasure of Sherlock Holmes' adventures is not just in the revelation of the solution to the mystery, but also in the details: the accumulation of not-quite-explicable facts along the way. It is detail that material culture provides in infinite variety. Though the significance of a clue like the missing footstool may never be decoded conclusively, it might nonetheless exert a salutary influence on the process of writing history. As Holmes himself put it, 'perhaps when a man has special knowledge ... it rather encourages him to seek a complex explanation when a simpler one is at hand'.³⁰

Notes

- 1 A typical poetic example is the couplet, 'Nature's cast fabrick he controuls alone; This globe's his footstool, high heaven his throne.' Thomas Amory, *The Life of John Bunble, Esq; containing various observations and reflections, made in several parts of the world* (London, 1770).
- 2 James Yorke, 'Archbishop Juxon's Chair', *Burlington Magazine*, 141, 1154 (May 1999), pp. 282-6; Anthony Coleridge, 'English Furniture and Cabinet-makers at Hatfield House, 1: c.1600-1750', *Burlington Magazine*, 109, 767 (Feb. 1967), pp. 63-70, 72: 67. Documentary evidence related to this set attests that, as one might expect, the expense of a royal footstool was mostly in the fabric used to cover it. The furniture maker in this case was the royal supplier Thomas Roberts, who charged £17 for the throne and £3 for the footstool, while merchant Anthony Ryland received £72 for the 'eight yards of rich gold and blue brocade' used to cover them.
- 3 A complete account of the ceremonies observed in the coronations of the kings and queens of England (London: printed for J. Roberts, 1727).
- 4 Jane West, *Letters to a Young Lady* (London: Longman, Hurst, Rees and Orme, 1806).
- 5 Stana Nenadic, 'Middle-rank Consumers and Domestic Culture in Edinburgh and Glasgow 1720-1840', *Past and Present*, 145 (Nov. 1994), pp. 122-56.
- 6 Theresa Villiers to Parker of Saltern, 23 December 1805. Plymouth and West Devon Record Office, ref. 1259/2/759. Another mention of footstools as a gift appears in a letter from Thomas P. Robinson, Third Baron Grantham, to his aunt Katherine Gertrude Robinson, 23 July 1804. Bedfordshire and Luton Archives and Record Service [L.30/16/17-L.30/28/2, ref.30/16/18/23]. That it was appropriate to give such an apparently functional object as a gift may suggest a degree of novelty or curiosity in the form.
- 7 The Buck print and its pendant 'Darling Asleep' were reproduced in Ackerman's *Repository of the Arts* and were popular enough to be reproduced on tabletops - an example in scagliola is in the Museu Nacional de Arte Antiga, Lisbon.
- 8 A *Description of Holland: or, the present state of the United Provinces* (London: J. and P. Knapton, 1743), pp. 212-13. Dutch paintings showing footwarmers in use are fairly common in the seventeenth century; a good example is Egland Van Neer (1635-1703), *The Visit*, 1664 (Museum voor Schone Kunsten, Antwerp).
- 9 Nancy Goynne Evans, *Windsor Chair-making in America: From Craft Shop to Consumer* (Hanover and London: University Press of New England, 2006), p. 344; *Oxford English Dictionary*, 'cricke'.
- 10 An account of some remarkable passages in the life of a private gentleman, with reflections thereon (London: Joseph Downing, 1708).
- 11 David L. Porter, 'Monstrous Beauty: Eighteenth-century Fashion and the Aesthetics of Chinese Taste', *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, 53, 3 (2002), pp. 395-411; Elizabeth Kowaleski-Wallace, *Consuming Subjects: Women, Shopping and Business in the Eighteenth Century* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996).
- 12 Roy Porter, *Gout: The Patrician Malady* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998).
- 13 See John E. Crowley, 'The Sensibility of Comfort', *American Historical Review*, 104, 3 (June 1999), pp. 749-82, at 756-7. For a further history of reclining furniture in relation to invalidism, see Margaret Campbell, 'From Cure Chair to Chaise Longue: Medical Treatment and the Form of the Modern Recliner', *Journal of Design History*, 12, 4 (1999), pp. 327-43.
- 14 In 1770, for example, John Andrews wrote that a 'scrupulous Conformity to established Manners and Customs constitutes indubitably, as essential a Difference as any subsisting in the Character of the French, when compared with that of the English: no People acting more from pure, native, unrestrained Impulse than we do, without inquiring about the Ways of others; and no Nation, on the other Hand, more tamely submitting to the Guidance of the Mode, in every Respect, than the French.' *An Account of the Character and Manners of the French* (London: E. and C. Dilly, 1770), p. 75.
- 15 L.M. Stretch, *The beauties of history; or, pictures of virtue and vice, drawn from real life, designed for the instruction and entertainment of youth* (London: Charles Dilly, 1780), p. 17.
- 16 Elizabeth Montagu to Edward Montagu, 10 August, 1769. Huntington Library ms. 2713.
- 17 My thanks to Elizabeth Eger for this reference.
- 18 The footstool, made by Jean-Baptiste-Claude Sené in 1788, is in the collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.
- 18 Penelope Hunter, 'A Royal Taste: Louis XV, 1738', *Metropolitan Museum Journal*, 7 (1973), pp. 89-113.
- 19 In America the *récliner* became immediately popular as a 'Grecian sofa'. On the introduction of the form see Dean Lahikainen, *Samuel McIntire: Carving an American Style* (Salem, MA: Peabody Essex Museum, 2007).
- 20 Nancy Goynne Evans, *Windsor Chair-making in America*, pp. 131-2.
- 21 Richard Graves, *The Spiritual Quixote, or, The Summer's Ramble of Mr. Geoffrey Wildgoose* (London, 1773), p. 284.
- 22 Giorgio Riello, *A Foot in the Past: Consumers, Producers and Footwear in the Long Eighteenth Century*. Pasold Studies in Textile History 15 (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), pp. 205ff.
- 23 Jules David Prown, 'The Truth of Material Culture: History or Fiction?', in Steven Lubat and W. David Kingery (eds), *History From Things: Essays on Material Culture* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1993); reprinted in Kenneth Haltman (ed.), *American Artifacts: Essays in Material Culture* (Ann Arbor: Michigan State University Press, 2002), p. 14.
- 24 Heinrich Wölfflin, *Renaissance and Baroque*, transl. Kathrin Simon (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1967), pp. 76-7.
- 25 Charles Rice has written suggestively about the study of the domestic interior as a form of detective work in 'Evidence, Experience and Conjecture: Reading the Interior Through Benjamin and Bloch', *Home Cultures*, 2, 3 (2005), pp. 285-97.
- 26 Maxine Berg, *The Machinery Question and the Making of Political Economy 1815-1848* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980).
- 27 See John Hatcher, 'Labour, Leisure, and Economic Thought Before the Nineteenth Century', *Past and Present*, 160 (August 1998), pp. 64-115; Maxine Berg and Elizabeth Eger, *Luxury in the Eighteenth Century: Debates, Desires and Delectable Goods* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002).
- 28 Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction, Vol. 1* (New York: Random House, 1990), orig. pub. as *La Volonté de Savoir*, 1976.
- 29 Porter, 'Monstrous Beauty'.
- 30 Arthur Conan Doyle, 'The Adventure of the Abbey Grange', in *The Return of Sherlock Holmes* (1904).