HIST 7250: Visual and Material Culture

In this course, we will explore the history of material and visual culture in the United States, as well as a variety of approaches to the study of this field. Through formal analysis of objects and images, readings in criticism, theory, and history, and site visits, students will consider questions of cultural and social reproduction, capitalism and consumption, materiality, intermediation, technology, spectatorship, and media specificity. By the end of the course, students will have a more sophisticated understanding of the ways that visual and material culture have altered cultural, social and perceptual customs, and will have more confidence interpreting such sources as historical evidence. Each week, students will be assigned an object from the MFA’s collection to analyze, and we will begin each class in front of that object.

Required Books:


Everything else can be found on the course site.

Assignments: In addition to completing the reading, participating in a prepared, engaged manner, and taking responsibility for generating questions and leading discussion for one class of their choice, students will be required to submit a 20-25 page research paper on a single object or collection at the end of the term. This paper will be broken into three portions, each of which will be submitted separately over the course of the term. One portion will place the selected subject(s) in theoretical context, another in formal context, and the last in historical context. Grades will be based on participation and the final paper, which will incorporate the various sections students have submitted throughout the term.

Sections will be submitted on Feb 16, March 16, and April 6. The final version of the paper will be due April 20.
January 12: Introduction to Visual and Material Culture: Theories and Approaches

Approaching Objects and Images:


Reflections on the Literature in Material Culture:


Reflections on the Literature in Visual Culture:


1. How do these methodological approaches differ? Which one do you gravitate towards? Why?
2. Martin’s article describes some of the trends in the study of material culture in the early 1990s, when the field experienced a revival. As you read it, consider the following: Why does she think consumerism is a useful starting point for historical discussions of objects? What are some of the assumptions made by scholars using this framework? How do these differ from discipline to discipline? What, according to Martin, are some of the questions about American history that this analytical framework has raised or answered? Can you think of any additional questions that she doesn’t bring up?
3. Trentmann’s article describes some of the trends in the study of material culture about 25 years after Martin’s article was published. As you read it, consider the following: How has the field changed in those 25 years? What are the field’s new preoccupations and trends? Who are its major theorists, past and present? Trentmann takes historians to task for gaps in the literature on things—what gaps does he perceive? What does he suggest as future directions for research?
4. Why does Cook think visual culture remains a useful starting point for historical discussion?
5. Cook describes a field that came into being in the 1970s. How has the field changed since that time, according to Cook? What are its new preoccupations and trends? Who are its major theorists, past and present?
6. Is there anything you would add to these definitions, given the decade that has passed? Has the advent of the digital world altered the study and definition of visual culture in any way?

January 26: Distinction and Consumption (Meet in the American Wing at 4; be prepared to show us which object you have selected and explain why you selected it)

Object:

- “Mrs. James Warren (Mercy Otis),” John Singleton Copley, c. 1863. (MFA American Wing)
Theory:

• Revisit Ann Smart Martin’s article.

History:


1. What arguments about American society do Lovell and Bushman make—what change over time do they seek to establish?
2. What arguments about visual and material culture do they make, either implicitly or explicitly? Does their work ultimately confirm or reject Bourdieu’s ideas?
3. Lovell is an art historian—how might her article be different if written by a historian? Would Bushman have a different take on these portraits?
4. After this week’s readings, how did your perspective on the arguments made by Martin, Trentmann, Morgan and Cook change? Or did they?
5. Does the object you selected reveal processes of social stratification and identity formation? If so, how? If not, why not?

Feb 2: Production and Labor—MAUREEN DOING QUESTIONS

Object:

• High Chest of Drawers, attributed to John Townsend, c. late 1750s (MFA American Wing)

Theory:


History:


Feb 9: Materiality and Agency—I DO QUESTIONS

Object:

• Choose an object in the MFA’s American wing that exemplifies one of the arguments posed by Roberts, Greenblatt, Miller or Latour, and be prepared to discuss it in class.
Theory:

- Revisit Frank Trentmann's article.
- Danny Miller, “Materiality: An Introduction,” at http://www.ucl.ac.uk/anthropology/people/academic_staff/d_miller/mil-8

History:


Feb 23: Rhetoric—MELISSA DOES QUESTIONS

Object:

- Sideboard, Ignatius Lutz, 1850-1860. (MFA American Wing)

Theory:

- Review Montgomery and Prown.

History:

- Kenneth Ames, *Death in the Dining Room and Other Tales of Victorian Culture* (Temple University Press, 1995), 1-6, 44-149.

March 2: Medium Specificity (meet in the BPL Rare Books study room to examine O’Sullivan photographs)—KERRY DOES QUESTIONS

Object:

- Edward S. Curtis, “The Vanishing Race,” 1904 (MFA Herb Ritts Gallery)

Theory:

- Revisit Paton.
- Sontag’s *On Photography*, TBD.

History:


March 16: Nation and Citizenship (meet at the BPL’s Leventhal Map Center)—JILLIAN DOES QUESTIONS

Object:

- *Township No. 15 North Range No.15 East of the Indian Meridian, Indian Territory* (1877)
• Statistical Atlas of the United States, 1898 (BPL’s Leventhal Map Center)

Theory:
• Benedict Anderson, Imagined Communities (Verso, 1983), 1-8, 163-186. (online access)
• James Scott, Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed, (Yale University Press, 1999) 25-52. (online access)

History:
• Mark MonMonier, How To Lie With Maps, 2nd ed. (University of Chicago Press, 1996), TBD.

March 23: Consumer Culture—AUBREY DOES QUESTIONS

Object: TBD

Theory:
• Thorstein Veblen, “Conspicuous Consumption” (Ch. 4), in Theory of the Leisure Class [orig. 1899] (Oxford, 2007). (The “Introduction” by Martha Banta in this edition is also recommended.)

History:

March 30: Memory and Iconography—COURTNEE DOES QUESTIONS

Object: “Uncle Sam Wants You!” poster (MFA WWI Poster exhibition)

Theory:
• Sontag, TBD.

History:

April 6: Design—VICTORIA DOES QUESTIONS

Object:
• Child’s Chair, Charles Eames (MFA Gallery on the 1950s and 1950s)
Theory:
• Harvey Molotch, Where Stuff Comes From: How Toasters, Toilets, Cars, Computers and Many Other Things Come to Be as They Are (Routledge, 2003), TBD.

History:
• Amy Ogata, Designing the Creative Child: Playthings and Places in Mid-Century America (University of Minnesota Press, 2013), xvii-104.

April 13: Sense and Sensibility—VICTORIA DOES QUESTIONS

Object:
• Choose any object or image from the MFA’s American Wing, and be prepared to discuss how it pertains to the Classen and Smith.

Theory:

History
• Mark Smith, Sensing the Past: Seeing, Hearing, Smelling, Tasting, and Touching in History (University of California Press, 2008), all.

April 20: Class Presentations