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### Object Selection in Prownian Analysis

According to Tomita Kojiro, a scholar of Japanese art, “It has been said that art is a tryst, for in the joy of it maker and beholder meet.” If art is a tryst between maker and beholder, then objects of material culture are an impassioned, prolonged affair between the beholder and all of human culture. Art objects are the product of an individual channeling a thread of universal energy into an aesthetic experience--an individual communicating his or her own interpretation of the world, his/her own reactions, struggles, pain, and hope--through an intangible, indirect, aesthetic experience with another individual. But artifacts “that express culture unconsciously” are more subtle and unintentional. Unconscious objects of material culture are a transportation to the face of humanity and an expression of collective cultural thought. Through material culture, “our senses make affective contact with the senses of the past” and the collective senses of the present.<sup>1</sup> This distinction between the material culture of art and the material culture of objective artifacts, while complex and often overlapping, is fundamental to material culture research and to Prownian analysis.

In “Mind in Matter,” Jules Prown distinguishes between art and “unconscious” artifacts, saying that works of art “constitute a large and special category within artifacts because their inevitable aesthetic and occasional ethical or spiritual (iconographic) dimensions make them direct and often overt or intentional expressions of cultural belief.”<sup>2</sup> He goes on to note that “artifacts that express culture unconsciously are more useful as objective cultural indexes.”<sup>3</sup>

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1. Jules D. Prown, *Art as Evidence: Writings on Art and Material Culture* (Newhaven and London: Yale University Press, 2002), 75

2. *Ibid.*, 71.

3. *Ibid.*

Successful Prownian analysis of an artifact begins with careful artifact selection; the best essays in *American Artifacts* take into account the distinction between objects with unconscious cultural meaning and those with a conscious, personal aesthetic.

An important methodological fluctuation among essays in *American Artifacts* is the dichotomy between essays that interpret “unconscious” objects (which are indisputably products of collective culture) and essays that interpret more “artistic” objects (which are heavily burdened with the aesthetic vision of one individual maker). The goal of Prownian analysis is, after all, to use objects “actively as evidence” of culture--not to interpret their artistic meaning (which is the aim of art historians and critics)<sup>4</sup>. Some essays in *American Artifacts* adhere more closely to this “actively as evidence” intention than others; some objects seem more a tryst between maker and beholder than a sculptural cultural truth.

For example, Leslie Shannon Miller’s essay “The Many Figures of Eve” interprets the meaning and metaphor of a late-nineteenth century corset. In doing so, Miller sheds light on the practice of corset wearing and the communication inherent in small, corseted waists.<sup>5</sup> The corset she describes in this essay is representative of many other corsets, and her conclusions could be applied to many other similar-looking, mass produced corsets. Her corset is the product of culture, and its small aesthetic embellishments (the lace at the top) do not dominate or obscure the greater cultural value of the corset. The aesthetic elements of this corset add complexity and depth to the greater cultural phenomenon of corset wearing--they do not reflect a complex and emotional individual artistic vision. The universality of her analysis--the fact that it can be applied to all corsets and to an entire cultural phenomenon--shows that she has used corsets as “evidence” for a greater understanding of culture.

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4. Ibid., 69.

5. Leslie Shannon Miller. "The Many Figures of Eve: Styles of Womanhood Embodied in a Late-Nineteenth-Century Corset" In *American Artifacts*, ed. Jules David Prown and Kenneth Haltman (East Lansing: University of Michigan Press, 2000) 129-147.

On the other hand, Robyn Asleson's essay "Seduced by an Old Flame" describes a very aesthetic--and artistic--lighter.<sup>6</sup> This lighter is the atypical, aestheticized vision of (likely) one industrial designer. The author herself admits that the lighter is only an "amusing bauble."<sup>7</sup> The meaning gleaned from this lighter is not a meaning that can be gleaned from another lighter; the lighter is a tryst--reflective of an individual aesthetic--it is a deliberate, conscious reflection of culture through the lens of one individual. In her analysis of the lighter, Asleson does explore the important cultural indexes of lipstick and bullets, describing their connection to sexuality and power. However, her analysis might've been more applicable if she had chosen to "unpack" the lipstick tube itself (an iconic and mass produced object capable of providing cultural evidence)--instead of the lipstick as a visual relative of the novelty lighter. Although all of Asleson's conclusions are logical and illustrative of the artistic intention of the lighter, this object (because of its novel, niche, artistic nature) doesn't constitute cultural "evidence." An object that is not a functional part of culture can provide only artistic reflection on said culture--not direct evidence for it.

Undoubtably, there is merit in artistic analysis of objects. Metaphor--an artistic tryst--can reveal fundamental truths about the human experience and can illuminate individual lives. However, the goal of material culture analysis is to use an object as cultural evidence. One artist's (or industrial designer's or crafts person's) vision is not *evidence* for wider cultural phenomenon. It is the wide cultural acceptance, integration, and imbued meaning of an unconscious object that can be "unpacked" as direct and indisputable evidence of culture. As a result, object selection is perhaps the most important step of Prownian analysis and methodology. By adhering to this methodology and choosing unconscious objects of culture,

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6. Robyn Asleson. "Seduced by an Old Flame: Paradox and Illusion in a Late-Twentieth-Century Lucite Lighter" In *American Artifacts*, ed. Jules David Prown and Kenneth Haltman (East Lansing: University of Michigan Press, 2000), 29-45.

7. *Ibid.*, 29.

scholars can ensure that conclusions drawn from objects are indeed valid and worthy of the title “material culture analysis” (as opposed to artistic analysis with a nod to cultural phenomenon). Objects that are representative and collective make for better essays than aestheticized, oddity objects (which are more appropriate for artistic interpretation--a tryst rather than a prolonged affair).

Because their authors have chosen objects representative more of collective culture than of individual artistic vision, I think the candlestick telephone, corset, lava lamp, and Argand lamp essays are the most successful and credible. These objects are incontrovertible components of collective culture; they are also unconscious expressions of meaning. They are representative of a prolonged affair between the beholder and all of human culture (instead of a personal artistic tryst), and they are capable of providing cultural evidence, which is the purpose of Prownian analysis.

Word Count: 1,004

Works Cited

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