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Craft and comment: A proposed model for artifact study

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CRAFT AND COMMENT:
A PROPOSED MODEL FOR ARTIFACT STUDY

by
John Joseph Paschetto

A thesis submitted to the Faculty of the University of Delaware in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in Early American Culture

May 1988
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A PROPOSED MODEL FOR ARTIFACT STUDY

by

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This thesis is dedicated to Katherine, who has been more dedicated to it than its author has been.
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Chapter 1

ART HISTORY'S AND MATERIAL CULTURE'S COMMON GROUND

Almost twenty years ago, the art historian George Kubler made a plea to his colleagues:

In the history of art, which is a young discipline, it has long been necessary to restrict attention to manageable questions like artistic biography and catalogues and iconography. It is now apparent that many of those tasks have been accomplished and that we need not repeat them over and over. . . . Many more new tasks lie in connecting the history of art with other fields of thought, by finding intersecting lines of investigation where thought renews both itself and the fields it illuminates. In other words, the history of art now can look beyond its own well-worn road to intersections with other roads. 1

Kubler had already provided one theoretical framework for such a broadening of the art-historical outlook with his Shape of Time, 2 and a few other art historians have since offered their own frameworks, such as "Mind in Matter," by Jules David Prown, 3 and Beyond Necessity, by Kenneth L. Ames. 4 Nevertheless, the majority of art historians have continued to focus on artistic biography, catalogues, and iconography.

The ideas of Kubler, Prown, and Ames have been

1

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adopted instead by students of material culture, a discipline even younger than art history. As wide-ranging as art historians are parochial, material culturalists have used theories originally formulated for the studies of folklore, archeology, anthropology, sociology, economic history. They have linked their writings to the literatures of numerous scholarly fields, with results that have deepened our understanding not only of the artifacts involved, but, much more important, of the entire cultures that produced them. Material culturalists have approached artwork and art historiography at least as readily as they have any other field. Yet art historians by and large have not traveled in the opposite direction. It has thus become a commonplace that, while material culturalists study objects to understand the related culture, art historians study a culture only insofar as it helps them understand their chosen objects.

Reasons for the apparently illogical separation of art history's and material culture's aims will be examined in the first part of this thesis. Then one framework for artifact study that can establish a useful connection between art history and material culture will be proposed.

Although writings on artists and their work date
back at least as far as Herodotus, art history probably did not become a consolidated field until the eighteenth century, with the formation in Europe of wide-ranging collections and backward-looking academies. The aesthetic theorists of the day—who can now be seen as the progenitors of art history—were largely concerned with the effects of art on the senses and how these had been created by mainly the classical and Renaissance masters. The most influential products of these concerns were probably Edmund Burke's *Philosophical Inquiry into the Sublime and the Beautiful* (1757) and Sir Joshua Reynolds's *Discourses* (delivered 1769-90). Both works take for granted an idea that remains current today: the main goal of an artwork is to operate in a certain, refined way upon the senses and thereby to create special emotions in the viewer. The nobler the emotions, the higher the art; in eighteenth-century terms, this means landscape painting, which shows merely untamed nature, is the lowest art, while history painting, with its scenes of heroes in moments of trial or achievement, is the highest—assuming it is well done. And for a painting to be well done, according to the academies, it has to use the designs of the masters as models. In the system exemplified by Burke and Reynolds, therefore, the painter's technique and the painter's subject have equal
weight in making up a great work of art.

Ever since the time of Reynolds, however, this balance has been gradually but insistently tipping toward one side. As Alan Gowans argues in *The Restless Art*, the generations of artists and art historians that followed Reynolds all placed more and more emphasis on the subject of a painting, what it ultimately conveys, with less and less on technique alone. Technique, the means of painting, found itself being changed in whatever way was necessary to suit the all-important end, the subject of painting as it was defined at the time.

Nevertheless, no generation has admitted to abandoning the independent laws, what we might call aesthetics, that are supposed to govern technique. On the contrary, painters, in order to retain credibility while challenging the laws of their immediate forebears, have continually tried to show how their particular stretching of the laws is actually quite in keeping with the laws' original spirit. Then, as that generation ages and its amendments to technique become more or less ratified, the next generation of painters comes along with its own variations, often just as abhorrent to the rebels of twenty years earlier as were the latter's ideas when they were new. Thus Ruskin, who began by championing the
Pre-Raphaelites, ended by libeling the Impressionists.

A stubborn belief in the existence of laws governing technique (while what constitutes those laws remains a source of argument) informs modern art history. Art historians accept, usually tacitly, that there are certain technical laws that determine good art, that determine, say, Whistler's art to be better or at least more important than Emanuel Leutze's. This general idea of value is so deeply ingrained in art-historical thinking that almost no scholars since the turn of the century have spent much time arguing it, except when they are trying to get a hitherto disregarded artist accepted as worthy of study. They usually take up the artists and artwork that are generally accepted as valuable and, as Kubler points out, focus on related biographies, catalogues, and iconography.

When the studies now seen as the source of one current of material-culture scholarship were undertaken, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, they strove to expand the aesthetic laws, as had so many generations before, in order to win acceptance of their objects—in most cases early American furniture. Scholars like Irving Lyon, R.T.H. Halsey, and Wallace Nutting evidently felt the same technical imperatives,
the same indicators of value, to be radiated by eighteenth-century furniture and silver as Ruskin had found in the early works of Millais. They therefore sought the respect of art historians and adopted art-historical methodology.

One can find art-historical methodology in virtually all material-culture studies, outside archeology, up to the 1960s, and it continues to be a strong influence. As applied to material culture, this methodology argues that certain objects, in addition to such recognized art objects as paintings and sculptures, are so beautiful that they deserve study as art. In the classics of this approach, for example William MacPherson Hornor's *Blue Book, Philadelphia Furniture* and Joseph Downs's *American Furniture*, the scholar personally takes for granted the independent value of the objects under study and therefore considers useful any information about such objects. It is enough to find out who made this supreme chair, what precedents helped inspire its design, who taught its maker. A much later example of the same approach is Robert F. Trent's *Hearts and Crowns*. Trent first argues for the artistic value of his chosen objects—the turned chairs of southern Connecticut—explaining how their makers, supposedly
ignorant of aesthetics, actually had many incredibly subtle proportions in mind, which in fact took into account Baroque and Rococo precedents. The remainder of the book is concerned with finding the genius who first designed the so-called heart and crown chair and with cataloguing the many designs that subsequently grew out of that master's work. If one were to eliminate Trent's initial argument that the chairs are art, the book would be no different from the thousands of art-historical treatises published each year detailing the influences on and creations of hundreds of artists.

With the 1960s, however, many material culturalists, prompted largely by archeologists, began to question the usefulness of art-historical methodology. James Deetz\textsuperscript{10} and Ivor Noel Hume,\textsuperscript{11} both archeologists, and folklorist Henry Glassie,\textsuperscript{12} to name some of the most influential challengers, recognized the absurdity of trying to see things like building foundations and cheap dishes as art and the poverty of results from such a conservative approach. Ascertaining the pedigree of a utilitarian object, even an exceptionally pretty one, came to be relatively inconsequential--merely the foundation, not the capstone, of scholarly work. The beauty of an object was seen as just a very small part of its value to scholars; there was a wealth of cultural
information in objects, awaiting broader methodologies and more open-minded scholars.

As the new demands gained currency, new methodologies were formulated to meet them. Three works presenting such methodologies stand out for their discrete formulation and their influence on material culturalists: "Artifact Study: A Proposed Model," by E. McClung Fleming;¹³ "Mind in Matter: An Introduction to Material Culture Theory and Method," by Jules David Prown; and The Shape of Time, by George Kubler.

Fleming, once director of education at Winterthur Museum, developed his model while at Winterthur, and the model reflects the problem many museum officials face in having to understand and make order out of a large number of randomly accumulated and oddly assorted objects. He intends his model to work for all artifacts and hopes that, even though his thinking is oriented toward cultural history, the model will work as well for other fields. In order to be so widely applicable, Fleming's model must impose no special criteria on the world of objects; unlike the art-historical approach, his model will accept any object, no matter how poorly made or ugly. Indeed, the first step in applying his model is simple identification, determining what the object is,
what it is used for and made from, where and when it was made, etc. This approach is identical to that used by, for example, field biologists, who objectively as possible catalogue new forms. Fleming, like so many material culturalists today, seeks the respect not of art historians but of scientists, or science-minded historians and anthropologists. He begins with simple, unbiased observation.

The second step in Fleming's model, evaluation of the object, is much closer to art-historical methods. He breaks evaluation into two types, which parallel both the assumption of aesthetic value that underlies art history and the search for stylistic precedents that typifies much art-historical research. Accordingly, Fleming's first type of evaluation

has to do with judgments of aesthetic quality and workmanship, i.e., appropriateness of material and texture, skill and taste of craftsmanship, effectiveness of overall design. ... a subjective exercise of the observer's taste and discrimination. 14

This type of evaluation, only one brief step in Fleming's model, is the unwritten rule that guides most art-historical study. The entire art establishment--gallery directors, museum curators, scholarly doyens--are constantly, quietly exercising their taste and discrimination in deciding what is good art and thus
determining what art historians may and may not study. How art historians study the approved artists in turn resembles Fleming's second type of evaluation:

Factual comparisons of one object with others of its kind... applying to the object such adjectives as similar, unique, early example, avant-garde, retardataire, and so on. 15

This "factual" evaluation is what Trent does in Hearts and Crowns and what art historians usually make their life's goal, seeking the true chronological order of an artist's oeuvre, the identities of an artist's teachers, the earliest artist in a given style.

For Fleming, again, even the second type of evaluation is only a step, a further gathering of information, toward his goal of completely interpreting an object. After evaluation, his model proceeds to cultural analysis, which, he claims, "embraces the largest potential of artifact study." 16 Fleming realizes that this step is in effect an expanded form of his second type of evaluation; we are now placing the object not merely in its immediate context of related objects, but in the broadest context, the entire contemporary culture. In this way, he hopes, we can learn all the object has to tell about its part of the past or its region of the world, since we consciously open ourselves
to all its possible significances, not just its role, often dubious, as an aesthetic monument. Fleming further realizes that, even though objects are generally believed to illuminate the cultures that produce them, few durable methods of quantifying such illumination have been worked out. Fleming's model itself brings us up to this analysis but, aside from recommending careful research and cautious generalizing, does not spell out a procedure.

It is here, as Fleming again recognizes, that material culturalists have drawn on other disciplines for methodologies or at least general outlooks. From social history has been taken statistical analysis of, for example, the relation between someone's income and the object owned; from linguistics has been derived the charting of building techniques as they move from region to region; from sociology have come ideas of status and display. This interdisciplinary vigor is reflected in Fleming's fourth and final step, interpretation, which is another step that art historians often ignore. For Fleming, interpretation means the linking of what step three, cultural analysis, has told us with what we, members of a different culture, want to know. In effect, interpretation establishes our data's relevance. If we have already drawn on outside disciplines in step three,
we are that much closer to an integration of our findings with existing scholarship and thus with larger questions. Connecting individual research with big questions is in practice often facile, a few grandiose sentences tacked to the end of a paper, but the inclination is healthy. Moreover, when such responsibility is taken seriously, it rescues research from being lost as pointless antiquarianism, anchoring it where, Fleming hopes, other researchers seek help. The earnest attempt made, for instance, by Robert Blair St. George in "'Set Thine House in Order': The Domestication of the Yeomanry in Seventeenth-Century New England" to connect early New England architecture with contemporary intellectual history not only makes the article itself more meaningful but also helps insure that historians of early New England, perhaps ignorant of architectural studies, will take up St. George's findings in their subsequent work.

Fleming's model points up the need for both broader interpretations of objects as evidence of their cultures and a less parochial application of findings--needs felt equally by art history and material culture. However, as mentioned above, he does not offer any specific way to derive cultural information from objects. One such way is supplied by Jules David Prown in his 1982 article "Mind in Matter."
Most of Prown's article treats in greater depth issues already mentioned by Fleming. Prown defines material culture and tries to explain why the discipline is of value, detailing the kinds of information one can derive only from objects. Objects do more than reflect their cultures; they recreate their cultures, constituting "surviving historical events." They are also representative of an entire culture, since all people use objects but not all write documents or become famous. Finally, objects often embody beliefs so fundamental that they are never overtly expressed, surviving only through their imprint upon things. Prown also, like Fleming, takes care to connect material culture with other disciplines, discussing art history, archeology, cultural geography, cultural history, etc., even providing a four-page bibliography of literatures of related fields.

Prown's specific model resembles Fleming's in several respects. Although he devotes some space to defining six categories of objects, ranging from art to devices, intended to give order to material culture, he admits that his categories need refining and that such categorization is in any case not vital to his subject:

Classification for purposes of manageability and discussion does not affect the actual process of material culture analysis described below which applies to all artifacts. 19
In other words, like Fleming, he feels the need to embrace all objects with his model, regardless of function or value. Accordingly, the first step in Prown's model is almost identical to that in Fleming's: unbiased observation of the object. The researcher measures it, observes what it is made of and how it is made, notes its formal and iconographic make-up. Prown does make more of an effort to remain unbiased, by delaying the application of outside information until the last possible moment. Thus, whereas Fleming's first question is, What is it? Prown does not ask what an object is until after he has gathered all information available through strictly uninformed observation.

Prown gives his reasons for this extreme rigor. Believing objects to be continually happening historical events, he further believes that modern observers can theoretically join members of the object's culture through direct, open-minded experience of that object. What the object embodies of its culture, especially the culture's tacit assumptions, is available to our senses, which are of course no different physiologically from the senses of the object's contemporaries:

By undertaking cultural interpretation through artifacts, we can engage the other culture in the first instance not with our minds, the seat of our cultural biases, but with our
Only after all the data of our senses have been written out may we safely move into Prown's key procedure, his methodology for deriving cultural evidence. He calls this procedure "speculation," and in it one allows all available knowledge to associate freely with the established data and so underline the cultural facts our senses uncovered in the object. As one example of speculation, he gives a student's idea that an eighteenth-century desk and bookcase resembles a printer's tray, with its many compartments, and a printing press, in the sense that a set of drawers was also called a press. This fruit of speculation is next tested through traditional research, looking for confirmation in other media, in this case perhaps poetic imagery that reflects an equation between printing and bookkeeping. One could say that Prown has here taken one of the first steps in the traditional scientific method, the formulation of a hypothesis, and made it into a science itself. Rather than build upon the aesthetic assumptions used by art history, Prown, like Fleming, looks to science for inspiration. He has also gone a step further than Fleming, by creating a model that draws upon a particular strength of objects as evidence, the timelessness of their language.
Some pains have been taken here to show the kinship of Fleming's and Prown's models to the open-ended methodology of science, which supposedly is receptive to all reality, rather than the closed system of art history, which documents one segment of reality whose overall significance has already been determined. This kinship reflects the difference material culturalists—for example, Prown and James Deetz—often see between their evidence and the elitist evidence of documents used by traditional historians. For a traditional historian, the significance of, say, Frederick the Great is predetermined and self-evident, just like the significance of Charles Willson Peale for an art historian; any information relating to Frederick the Great is ipso facto of value, the historian's job being simply to bring forth and order such information. Material culturalists, conversely, are using common objects, not necessarily art, to understand commoners, not just the elite.

This emphasis on the common, on all that history has to offer, has motivated Fleming and Prown to keep their models open to every type of object. Their models are machines for extracting every bit of information from any given object. Inevitably, then, their models do not help a researcher make sense out of the totality of
objects: as far as Prown and Fleming are concerned, one object has just as much potential as any other object. Indeed, their models are almost direct reactions against the ordering imposed by art history, which gives certain objects supreme importance and others none. Nevertheless, the need for some overarching framework within which their models can operate is felt by Prown, who presents a fairly standard breakdown of objects into six large categories of function. A much more original, and more complete, solution to the problem is provided by Kubler in *The Shape of Time*.

Instead of a model for analyzing single objects, Kubler presents a model for understanding and ordering the totality of objects. Like all material culturalists, he sees objects as linked in specific ways to history. Unlike most researchers, however, he does not leave these connections open to infinite methods of investigation, but limits them to the relationship between problems and solutions, or in his terminology "forms" and "classes." Kubler argues that history can be seen as a series of problems, or mental forms, to which people have continually fabricated solutions in the form of objects, or classes. One can therefore break up history into many form-classes, or problems with the series of objects made
to solve them. As summarized here, Kubler's argument sounds as if aimed only at technological explanations, but he evidently means "forms" to cover all the ideas people can have, from questions of food gathering to philosophical constructs. When the totality of objects is divided up according to these forms, groupings presumably arise that cut across the traditional division between artwork and utilitarian objects. Unfortunately, Kubler does not give many examples of his model at work.

The value of his model, however sketchy, is that it enables a researcher to handle groups of objects in history. Kubler's mental forms have life spans, resulting in series of objects traceable from generation to generation and changing (or remaining the same) as a culture changes (or remains the same). Mental forms also travel from place to place, showing for example how domestic architecture, one possible form-class, did or did not change when, transplanted from the Old to the New World, its problems changed in reality, though perhaps not in people's minds. A researcher dealing with a single object could turn to Kubler's model upon reaching, for example, the confirmation stage of Prown's model, when one is testing speculations by placing the object in context. Conversely, a researcher beginning with a group
of objects, say portrait prints of Federal leaders, could start with Kubler's model in order to clarify what objects do and do not belong in the study group, do and do not relate to the same form.

Surely one reason why Kubler's model has remained untouched by art historians is the downright obscurity of expression of *The Shape of Time*, a complaint that no one could make about Fleming's or Prown's articles. The book gives no fully explained example showing precisely how the model may work and contains apparently contradictory statements that undermine its general argument. After implying that the ordering imposed by forms would rearrange in a beneficial way our standard divisions between art and the utilitarian, he states again the old chestnut that art objects are useless, tools useful. Such problems have naturally restricted the number of Kubler's adherents outside the field of material culture. But even Fleming and Prown, for all their clarity, have been ignored by art historians. By and large, art historians have refused to integrate their objects with the rest of human creation.

Fleming, Prown, Kubler--indeed, all material culturalists--believe that objects can and should be used as cultural evidence. In thinking about objects, most
researchers, as exemplified by the models of Fleming and Prown, keep an open mind, allowing every kind of object a potential for conveying evidence. But Fleming implies, and Prown and Kubler admit, that art is different from other objects; how they perceive this difference helps explain the lasting divergence between material culturalists and art historians.

When listing the properties of objects, Fleming ends with function, naming utility, delight, and communication as its major types. Presumably, communication is best exemplified by written material, utility by tools, and delight by art. Prown takes a somewhat similar view of art, giving it a "special category" for its "inevitable aesthetic and occasional ethical or spiritual (iconic) dimensions." Finally, Kubler, as noted above, sees art as useless. All three men thus think of art primarily in terms of aesthetics—the goal of artwork is simply to be beautiful—an attitude in keeping with that of most art historians, whose work, as argued above, rests upon the assumption that certain laws of form, technique, color—in short, aesthetics—underlie their decisions of what to study. Fleming, Prown, and Kubler then go on to set up their own outlook, that objects can also be examined in terms of evidence. It is here that
they inevitably repel art historians. For the entire art-historical establishment is based on the belief in certain universals of aesthetic value, universals that give Thomas Eakins's portraits the same unquestionable worth as objects of study that straight historians find in George Washington. It is therefore an attack on their fundamental assumptions to ask them to look beyond aesthetics to cultural relevance. What they value in Eakins, Peale, Ryder, and their other subjects is precisely those artists' freedom from the restraints of their cultures. When art historians study an artist's culture, it is almost always in order to understand how the miracle of universality arose from particularity, not to subordinate the former to the latter.

At the same time, it is in this very divergence that a common model can be established. Art history and material culture have provided two ways of looking at objects: as direct sources of aesthetic pleasure, thus having universal importance, and as indirect sources of cultural knowledge, thus having relative importance. These two outlooks have been traditionally applied to artwork on the one hand and, by default, to utilitarian things on the other. However, in practice, an overlapping of the bailiwicks of art history and material
culture has been shown: many researchers, such as Robert Trent, find absolute aesthetic importance in utilitarian things, while many accepted artworks, especially the conceptual art of the past decade, repudiate aesthetic absolutes. This overlapping suggests a third way of looking at objects, a way based on varying levels of what has hitherto been seen as strictly universal or relative.

It is proposed, therefore, that all objects can be seen as embodying various levels of two properties, which are here called "craft" and "comment." Both properties will be defined in detail in the following chapter, but for the present argument craft can be defined as those things inevitably encountered in the making of an object, such as materials, technical traditions, and the skills of makers, while comment can be defined as those things affecting an object's form but capable of being separated from the object and embodied in different objects, in other media.

The property of craft may appear to be identical to aesthetics, comment to cultural knowledge. However, both aesthetics and cultural knowledge, seen as universal and relative importance, can in a given object derive from either craft or comment. The aesthetic pleasure Trent finds in turned chairs no doubt depends solely
upon their high level of craft, but the aesthetic importance art historians give to, for instance, Rembrandt's etchings derives not from the etchings' craft alone, but from its masterful combination with very powerful comment, a humane understanding superadded to craft. Art historians may often give the impression that universal importance is equivalent to a high level of what is here called craft, but that is simply because color and perspective can be more easily isolated and discussed intelligently than the emotional or psychological force embodied in a work.

The inability of craft alone to determine what art historians consider universal importance can be shown by another example. The early portraits of Rubens Peale, although demonstrating technical brilliance, have not commanded the respect given Eakins's work or even works by the perhaps less talented luminists. Peale's work, more dependent for its importance upon an understanding of his time and constraints, lacks the universality of comment that has caused Eakins to be so prized. Conversely, the claim of Duchamp's readymades to the status of high art rests almost entirely on their enduring, albeit academic, quality of comment, since the works demonstrate virtually none of the artist's craft.
Craft and comment, then, can independently vary from the very simple and diffuse to the virtuosic and powerful. In the most general terms, one could apply the model as follows to several of the standing divisions in the world of objects. So-called fine art consists of objects demonstrating high levels of both craft and comment; decorative art objects demonstrate a high level of craft but only diffuse or platitudinous comment; folk art objects, as the term is generally understood by museums, demonstrate low craft but powerful comment, sometimes so powerful, in fact, that it imposes an aesthetic making up for the initial lack of craft. Any individual object's universal or relative importance depends upon its fluency and depth of comment and how skillfully that comment is allied to the appropriate level of craft.

Using this model, researchers can establish a continuum from the objects of most concern to art historians to those of most concern to material culturalists. Universal and relative importance are not confined to certain forms or media; every artwork, no matter how lofty, must partake of the humblest elements of craft, and many utilitarian objects, seemingly blank, embody rich comment that deserves explication in its own right, not merely as evidence of its time. The inclinations of
museum-goers demonstrate this underlying order like a divining rod: most conceptual art, its comment poorly realized through craft, quickly ceases to interest them, while such supposedly mindless craft objects as friendship quilts they find fascinating. In short, aesthetics are not the only universals, and those other universals deserve scholarly recognition.
Chapter 2

THE PROPERTIES OF CRAFT AND COMMENT

A model for artifact analysis based upon properties of craft and comment would assist researchers both in imposing a working order on the vast array of objects, thus supplementing models like Fleming's and Prown's for analyzing individual objects, and in understanding the contexts of creation and effect for a particular form or a single object. At the close of the preceding chapter I showed briefly how craft and comment could be used to redefine folk art, decorative art, etc., toward making sense of broad divisions that already exist. Here craft and comment will be defined in greater detail, and issues relating to their meaning and usefulness will be discussed.

Of the two properties, craft is the more concrete and the more easily defined. As has been said, it consists of those things inevitably encountered in the making of an object. The most obvious elements of craft in a given object are the materials used, the tools used, and the maker's skill. The maple stock, the lathe that
shapes it, and the familiarity of the artisan with turning all are directly responsible for the look, shape, size, feel, and durability of the resulting chair. A less obvious element of craft is the tradition within which the maker works. This will tend to govern not only how the materials are prepared and the tools handled, but also the whole design of the object.

Design is not generally seen as a part of craft. While it is recognized that artists and artisans usually learn design just as they learn wielding a trowel or mixing colors, still scholars have placed design above and beyond craft, giving it the same weight in relation to craft that thought bears in relation to speech. But design, unlike thought, is empty of content: it is simply the arranging of shapes in two or three dimensions. Probably one reason why design has come to have a mind of its own is the situation in which most contemporary objects are produced, with the designer distantly removed from the actual maker. This distance is just an accident of the modern division of labor; no matter how many stories the designers' offices may be above the assembly line, their work is the indispensable basis for making specific products. They learn fundamental rules, a craft tradition, not qualitatively different from the rules
that govern successful use of an engraving tool or a sewing machine.

Another, more insidious reason why design has become separate from the rest of craft stems from art-historical practice. As mentioned in chapter one, art historians are naturally inclined to focus on design elements when evaluating a work, since these elements are more easily seen and described than qualities of emotion or mythic resonances. Thus, for example, Barbara Novak, in appraising Eakins' portraits, focuses specifically on the composition, while only implying the artist's extra-pictorial concerns that are so well embodied in the craft:

Eakins learned, as had Manet, from Velazquez, to use the limbo of empty space around a figure, making it function as surface and depth. In their full-length portraits, Sargent and Whistler, too, were aware of this spatial potential. But, more than they, Eakins could utilize the gestural attitude of the entire body as a psychological comment. Thus, in The Thinker: Louis N. Kenton . . . it is the arabesque of the suit against the surrounding space, rather than the face, that reveals the mood of the man. And in the asymmetric displacement of the gown over the shoulders, the inclined arms and tilted fan--indeed, in the way the posture is identified as much by the surrounding space as by its own silhouette--Letitia Wilson Jordan Bacon . . . suggests parallels with such a stylistically diverse work as Lautrec's Yvette Guilbert. 28

One here gets the impression that it is simply the
design, the compositional excellence, that makes the paintings admirable, equating design skill with overall creative genius because anything more intellectual than design is hardly present in the writer's speculations. This elevation of design is further encouraged among art historians because design is the only element of craft that comes across clearly in photographs, the medium through which art historians experience most paintings. One unfortunate side-effect of the divergence of design from the rest of craft in painting is that conservators are almost the only scholars who any longer have an understanding of the rest of painting craft, authoring or co-authoring the few valuable recent works in that area. 29

While it is certainly true that, to use David Pye's terminology, 30 design has more elements of risk than most other areas of craft, it is nevertheless based upon various traditions for the various media it affects, providing tools, procedures, and goals for its practitioners. At any rate, all recognized crafts differ in their levels of risk or difficulty, ranging perhaps from basket weaving and plain sewing near the bottom to musical composition and portraiture in oils near the top. While great difficulty may be cause for wonder and
higher value, it cannot be made the basis for an argument that certain crafts are in fact not crafts.

That design belongs with craft becomes clearer when design is contrasted to the property of comment. Comment, like craft, is embodied in an object and affects its form, but, unlike craft, it can be separated from a given object and can take shape in other objects. Unlike a given design, which comes about specifically for a given object or form and cannot be applied to another form, a given comment can take many forms without qualitative change. Although one can draw a design on paper, the design will still be linked to a specific object or series of replicas; a comment, on the other hand, if it can be put into words, will not suggest any particular object. Not a summation of how an object is made, comment is rather the motivation behind an object, in the broadest possible sense.

Comment can be divided into two categories, unintended and intended, similar to the aspects of function described by Fleming in the article examined in chapter one. All objects embody some unintended comment, the imprint of their maker's time and place. It is upon this diffuse, very relative comment that most research in material culture is based; hence the great care
theorizers like Fleming and Prown must take in drawing off such evidence and basing assumptions on it. Unintended comment, particularly in very simple utilitarian objects, can be so thin as to be almost unnoticeable, as with a wooden mallet, from which virtually nothing can be learned if the object is taken out of context. Unintended comment can also be more overt, as in an American Queen Anne style chair, from which a knowledgeable observer can usually derive a good idea of its place of origin. Intended comment, on the other hand, is consciously imposed by an object's maker. In many cases, such comment is just as inaccessible as unintended comment, and even when it is found, we may not recognize it as intended. A banjo clock, for example, presents a researcher with a mixture of impressions--the lightness of Federal design, the gaudiness of excessive gilding, the similarity in shape to a musical instrument--some of which may be intended, some unintended, and some nowhere but in the viewer's mind. To sort these impressions, like the speculations gathered in Prown's model, one must rely upon careful research, which should place the object in context.

In the process of confirmation, one may find some impressions to belong in both the province of craft
and the province of comment. To take again the example of a Queen Anne style chair, one might recognize the method used to join the front legs to the seat rails as indicative of a certain place. As mentioned above, this is a form of unintended comment: the chair's maker probably did not expect his method of construction to signal where the chair originated, but we in turn may read it as a signal and use it as the germ of some cultural knowledge. At the same time, the method of construction is also an element of craft, stemming from the maker's training and coming inevitably into play when a chair of this sort is made by an artisan working in this chair's tradition.

As one moves away from the largely utilitarian and toward objects whose motivation lies as much with the individual maker as with society as a whole, one finds comment, particularly intended comment, standing in bolder contrast to craft. We may think of painting and sculpture as the premier examples of intended comment since they are traditionally expected to represent interpretations of reality, but strong, intended comment can be found in other media as well, though perhaps less often. With utilitarian objects, makers are rarely encouraged into clear expression of any kind. When
intended comment is found in such objects or their media, it often takes the form of religious sentiment, since religion is one of the few widespread interests strong enough to overcome an artisan's reluctance or inability to mold a craft into expressive form. When sufficiently moved, the artisan makes an attempt, or many attempts, as one may see in sign-painter Edward Hicks's representations of a Christian paradise. Less unusual, and less powerful, is the intended comment artisans make with reference to their own craft. George Ohr's virtuosic pottery, for example, intentionally embodies his pride in his abilities, shocking the viewer. Within the past century, this craft-directed intended comment has also become popular with fine artists, many of whose works are wholly governed by the desire to display new ideas about observing and rendering, regardless of those ideas' philosophic value.

The rarest form of comment, and one that Western culture has come to treasure, is the lasting, strong, and eloquent intended comment embodied in so-called great art. Such comment, found one might say in Turner's Fighting Temeraire, reaches beyond the object itself and, empowered by the artist's craft, works upon the minds of generations of viewers. It has a universal importance
equal to that often ascribed to aesthetics alone and, as was argued in the preceding chapter, often accounts for much of the power that art historians allow pure aesthetics. The deliberateness of such comment can cause trouble for material culturalists precisely because it is so rare; often, as a result of technical quibbles or initial repulsion, the artist's contemporaries hardly recognize it as appropriate to their situation. Therefore, material culturalists have preferred the less conscious, though more recondite, comment found in the everyday.

When dealing with objects containing representations or words, it is important to realize that comment is not always equal to content. What is overtly shown or said in such objects is largely determined by craft traditions no weaker than those that guide technique or design. For this reason, many objects that art historians find boring, such as Berlin-work pictures, are quite intriguing to material culturalists, who generally have more practice in appreciating and learning from repetition and derivation rather than originality. Conversely, material culturalists can sometimes be too quick to dismiss a maker's personal contribution to an object's message, particularly a fine-art object, as only
an utterance from the zeitgeist. In bridging the gap between art history and material culture, what is called for is respect, on the one hand, for the broad cultural context of which fine art is necessarily a part and, on the other hand, for the absolute value that can be conferred on an object through a happy combination of craft and rich, intended comment. Such dual respect is exemplified by literary criticism, in which appreciation for the universal and appreciation for the relative comfortably coexist. This admirable situation is mainly due to the unquestionable ability of all literature, from billboards to epic poetry, to communicate something, and so no false distinction can be set up between examples that communicate and those that supposedly only perform work, in silence.

I believe that the usefulness of the craft/comment model proposed here resides in its ability to place an object or form in the contexts of quality and significance, in relating an object to other objects through a more practicable formulation of what is usually meant by "fine art," "decorative art," "utilitarian," etc. This model is therefore similar in function to Kubler's, which also seeks to place individual objects in context. Kubler's model is primarily aimed at placing objects in
the context of time, establishing series and sequences of artifacts with a related purpose. This model, on the other hand, seeks to situate an object in terms of the quality of its craft and the significance of its comment, both intended and unintended. Such context will, it is hoped, not only indicate the degrees of value an object held for its maker and users but also show where a material culturalist's reliance on relative value should give way to an art historian's faith in universal value, and vice versa. It is further hoped, however, that recognition of relative and universal value will arise from the study of individual cases, will be present together when appropriate in the work of a single scholar, and will no longer be predetermined by the current, arbitrary division between disciplines and between objects of study.
NOTES


22. Kubler, Shape of Time, 33.
23. Kubler cites, for example, Gregor Mendel's research into genetics as part of a typical form-class (Shape of Time, 109).

24. Kubler begins his text, "Let us suppose that the idea of art can be expanded to embrace the whole range of man-made things... It then becomes an urgent requirement to devise better ways of considering everything men have made" (Shape of Time, 1). Later he states, "Science and art both deal with needs satisfied by the mind and the hands in the manufacture of things" (Shape of Time, 10).

25. "In short, a work of art is as useless as a tool is useful. Works of art are as unique and irreplaceable as tools are common and expendable" (Shape of Time, 16).


31. "Function involves both the concrete and the abstract aspects of the artifact, the reasons for its initial manufacture, its various intended uses, and its unintended roles" (Fleming, "Artifact Study," 157).
BIBLIOGRAPHY


