From Winterthur's Seeing Things Differently

Introduction

Why bother with things? What do people see in these objects that gives them value and meaning? We surround ourselves with objects and use them every day. They shape our physical world and establish our place in our communities and culture. When these objects no longer satisfy our needs, we alter them or make new ones. We change their shapes and decoration or use them differently: a more "stylish" table replaces an old-fashioned one; a dinner plate becomes a coaster for a potted plant. These changing configurations of objects, therefore, become records of human existence and significant sources for historical and cultural interpretation.[1]

People have taken many different approaches in their efforts to discover the meanings of decorative arts objects. This essay and the exhibition it accompanies seek to affirm a pluralistic view of the decorative arts in early America by recognizing six particular points of view or ways of understanding these objects that represent current trends in scholarship.[2]

A first step in studying decorative arts objects is to determine what they are. To learn their various characteristics and gain insight about them, we may examine objects and note certain physical properties—material, construction techniques, and condition. Careful visual inspection is usually sufficient, but some questions are resolved better by use of scientific procedures such as x-radiography, microscopic examination of samples, or spectroanalysis.

The functions that objects serve and their individual histories are intangible attributes rather than physical ones. Properly recognized and described, they may suggest meaningful links to broader questions or concerns about the culture that produced them and, by reflection, our culture. Most objects have multiple functions, some of which may change over time. For example, an antique desk-and-bookcase once owned by Josiah Quincy may continue to function as an object of beauty and status, but if it becomes part of a museum collection, its function as a writing surface and place to store personal papers will likely cease (fig. 1).

An object's history influences its significance, value, and meaning. Careful determination of the record of change in an object, including changes in ownership patterns and use, association with historic people or events, and changes in physical condition, introduces many potentially rewarding avenues for further investigation. For years the Quincy desk-and-bookcase was misunderstood as a product of the late 1770s because of a 1778 ownership inscription. More careful examination revealed the inscription to be one of several that detail historical circumstances, raising the possibility that others may have owned the piece before Quincy. Comparison and contrast of the desk-and-bookcase with related objects suggests a significantly earlier date of manufacture.[3] Its aesthetic qualities and technical features, including use of exotic woods, more accurately illuminate mid eighteenth-century, not revolutionary, Boston culture and craft.

Fortified with knowledge that identifies and describes what the objects are, we can investigate "how" and "why." Some subjects these questions address include: how people made or used particular objects, why certain objects were fashionable (and how that may compare to our aesthetic responses), and why tastes differed from place to place. By interpreting patterns of use, we can use objects to explore facets of everyday life and culture that are not well recorded in letters, diaries, public records, and other kinds of written evidence.

As with any research endeavor, the selection of objects influences our observations and conclusions. Because objects do not survive randomly, they may represent the past unevenly. Some objects survive because they have an association with an important person (from George Washington to a dear family member) or an event, while others may have been merely put aside and left undisturbed until they were rediscovered. Seldom, however, have our ancestors consciously collected and preserved objects to create an unbiased sample. The Winterthur collection is a case in point. Although seemingly encyclopedic in range and depth, it contains notable examples of decorative arts owned primarily by wealthy inhabitants of the Northeast and does not broadly represent the population. Within these limitations, it is an exceptionally rich source of knowledge and inspiration about our past, which is the foundation of our present.

[1] These concepts are addressed in Unit 1, "Why Things Matter," *The Material Culture of American Homes,* slide-tape series, Winterthur, 1985.

[2] As comprehensive as these six perspectives may seem, the decorative arts are open to even more avenues of inquiry and appreciation.

[3] See Brock Jobe, "A Boston Desk-and-Bookcase at the Milwaukee Art Museum," *Antiques* 140, no. 3 (September 1991): 413–19.

The Galleries at Winterthur introduces a new way of looking at the museum's collection, providing you the opportunity to view the decorative arts up close and at your own pace. Combined with the period room settings, the exhibitions in the Galleries offer a more detailed understanding of the production, appearance, use, and study of domestic furnishings.

WHAT'S IN AN OBJECT?

The objects in the Galleries have survived through many generations. What have they meant to the people who kept them? What kind of information does an object communicate? How can we use that information to help us understand people in the past and the present?

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Perspectives on the Decorative Arts in Early America

WALTER J. LAIRD, JR., GALLERY

Consider objects from six different points of view:

CHANGE OVER SPACE

People take ideas about design, materials, and lifestyle with them from place to place. Observe how objects made at the same time, but in different locations, look different.

CHANGE OVER TIME

Objects made about the same time often appear similar, even when made from different materials. Find similarities and notice differences between objects made decades apart.

TECHNIQUE AND TECHNOLOGY

Discover the techniques used by craftspeople to manipulate the shape and surface of materials. Learn how changing technology influenced the lighting and heating of early American homes.

MAKER AND MARKETPLACE

Makers and sellers developed many methods for getting their goods to buyers and for attracting buyers to their goods. Explore how the marketplace influenced the way a maker crafted an object.

RITUAL AND CUSTOM

Objects used in early America provide evidence of how people behaved and the qualities they valued. Contrast today's customs with those of earlier centuries.

MESSAGE AND SYMBOL

Objects give tangible form to abstract ideas. Learn how people used the things they made or owned to define themselves and to honor other people or ideas.

First Floor