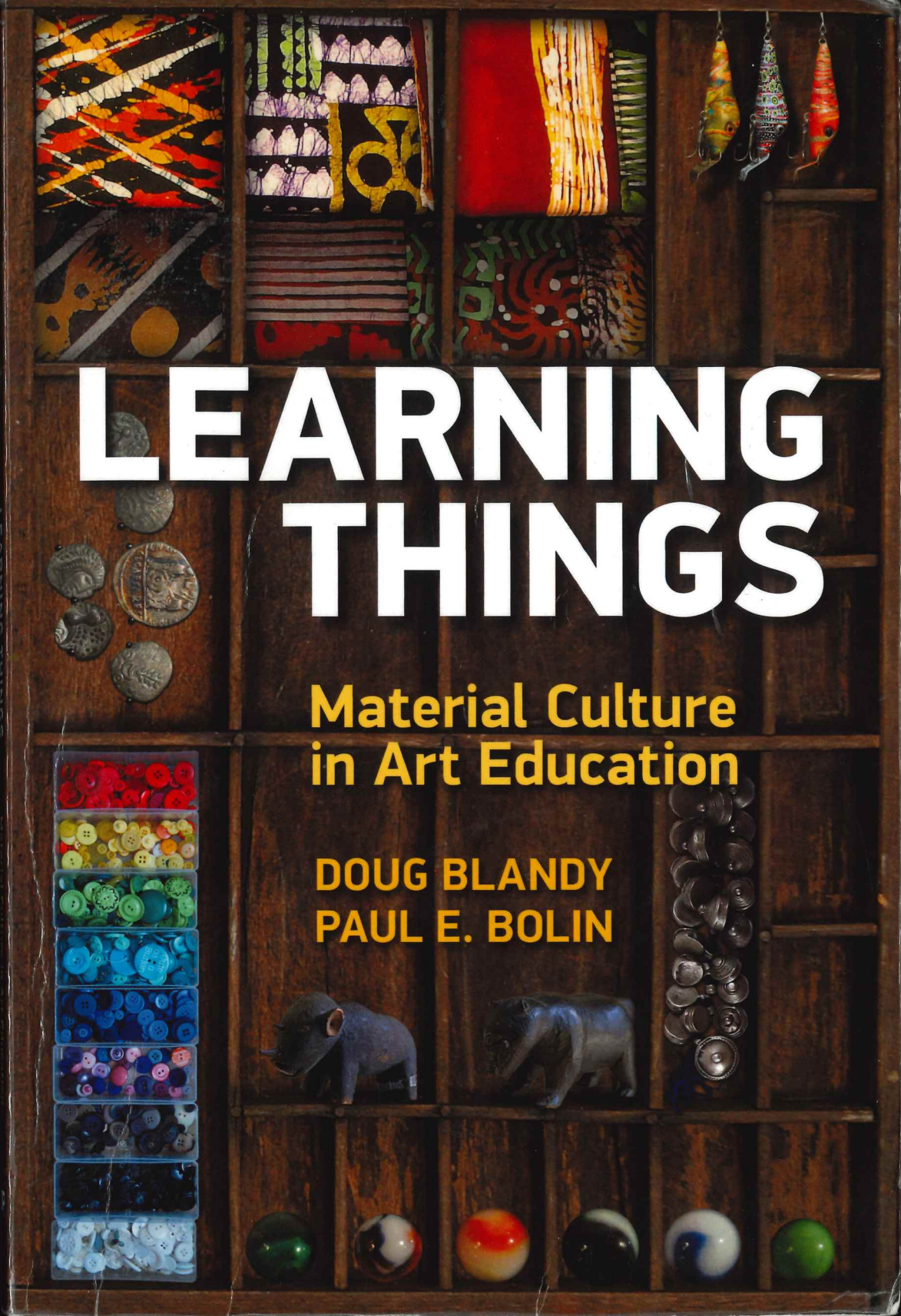
LEARNING THINGS
Material Culture in Art Education
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CHAPTER 1

# What Is Material Culture?

## Twelve Keys to Understanding Material Culture and This Book

Objects and spaces that surround us each day are commonly referred to as *material culture*. This two-word term encompasses the vast variety of artifacts and human-formed environments that society as a whole and specific individuals deem important to their lives. Material culture is generally regarded to comprise the purposefully constructed or intentionally acquired things we encounter, as well as the human-made spaces within our world. The subject of material culture is quite broad and encompasses a full range of objects and spaces in the past and present, yet discussions of material culture in this volume center primarily on objects. These are the items that help imbue our everyday lives with experience and meaning, the things and spaces that have been designed, shaped, fabricated, constructed, assembled, altered, devised, manufactured, or produced through some form of human activity. Material culture, then, is a reference to the human-formed objects, spaces, and expressions that make up our world, and frequently includes the articles we construct and/or possess for the purpose of personal memory making and the shaping of individual or group identity.

The term *material culture* has been in use for over 140 years to describe the objects and spaces that make up our world (Schlereth, 1985, 1992). During this time, the term *material culture* has been defined in a wide range of ways, yet most writers about material culture center their ideas on a belief that fundamental yet sometimes veiled relationships occur between people and the objects and spaces they encounter. To perceive and understand the valuable but frequently unrecognized connections that exist between people and objects or spaces requires thoughtful exploration and analysis. It is our belief that in order to secure a comprehensive understanding of the objects and constructed spaces that form our world, we must investigate and understand in deep and rich ways the people who make and use these objects and spaces. Conversely, in order to comprehend thoughtfully the vast spectrum of people that inhabit our world, it is to our advantage if we investigate thoroughly the myriad objects and spaces that these individuals and groups create,

use, respond to, and in some ways, preserve. As Sheumaker and Wajda (2008) state succinctly, the engagement of studying material culture "has been, and remains, to expand the understanding of human existence through attention to the relationships between objects and people" (p. xii). Because people make and shape things and spaces, and these fabricated objects and environments, in turn, help make to shape and influence individuals in the surrounding world, it is valuable for people to recognize and explore the important reciprocal relationships that occur between ourselves and the multitude of things and constructed spaces that form the world around us.

## WHAT IS MATERIAL CULTURE?

Getting a handle on the term *material culture* is not as easy as it may seem at first. For some people, *material culture* describes objects uncovered from centuries and millennia past, a designation given to artifacts unearthed while sifting through the matter of some faraway time and territory and is more tied to archaeological investigations than to items within our contemporary world. Although this may be the case for some objects, it is not so for all. Objects of material culture can be those we collect in our homes; carry with us in backpacks, purses, and pockets; and stow on shelves in the back of closets—often, the things we should discard even if we cannot bring ourselves to do so. Material culture also describes the articles we proudly display in our lives—photos, artworks, and handcrafted objects; memorabilia from past trips; and markers of time and life's adventures and accomplishments. The term *material culture* delineates the entire array of human-formed objects and spaces in our world. These items become tangible reminders of the many stories—both told and unspoken—that constitute our lives.

One useful way to apprehend what is meant by *material culture* is to add a grammatical preposition and article between the two words that make up this designation, so that it becomes the "material *of a* culture." In this way, such expressions become the physical and sensory manifestations that people make, use, respond to, and preserve within their world. Material culture denotes the constructed things and spaces around us, and thus items of material culture become important in helping us understand the values, beliefs, thoughts, skills, qualities, actions, and attributes of the people involved with them. Tilley, Keane, Küchler, Rowlands, and Spyer (2006) call the investigation of material culture an analysis of "things as material matter, as found or made, as static or mobile, rare or ubiquitous, local or exotic, new or old, ordinary or special, small or monumental, traditional or modern, simple or complex.



or complex" (p. 4). These authors go on to state that the study of such objects explores "the manner in which people think through themselves, and their lives and identities through the medium of different kinds of things" (p. 4). The study of material culture involves a look at both people and things, and the consequential interconnection that occurs between them.

Working from this idea, the terrain of what encompasses material culture seems quite vast. And so it is. Ian Woodward (2007) has referred to the wide purview of material culture in this way:

> In its popular scholarly usage, the term "material culture" is generally taken to refer to any material object (e.g., shoes, cup, pen) or network of material objects (e.g., house, car, shopping mall) that people perceive, touch, use and handle, carry out social activities within, use or contemplate. (p. 14)

Thus, the breadth of objects designated "material culture" is significantly far ranging. And so is the study of individuals and groups who come to bear on these objects and spaces as shapers and/or users of these items (see Figure 1.1). Reinforcing this idea, Sheumaker and Wajda (2008) have captured the broad expanse of material culture, and the study of it, quite well:

> *Material culture* encompasses those things that have physical form and presence, whether an object you can hold in your hand; an environment in which you live, work, worship, or play; or an image of the landscape you captured with your digital camera as you traversed a pond or a mountain range. Material culture is, then, culture made material—that is, it is the physical manifestations of human endeavor, of minds at work (and play), of social, economic, and political processes affecting all of us. (p. xi)

Material culture denotes those purposeful things and spaces that bring meaning, joy, knowledge, expression, contemplation, experience, and wonderment to our lives. They range from small in size—perhaps a coin, a needle, or a personal sitting area—to those items large in physical scope: an automobile, a house, place of worship, or even an entire cityscape (see Figure 1.2).

Material culture encompasses those artifacts and locations whose monetary and social value is agreed upon and readily apparent, such as a work of fine art or piece of noted historical memorabilia. It also includes those items whose significance is more personal and perhaps obscure, such as a collectible kitchen magnet, a well-used softball glove, or an inexpensive but cherished gift from a friend or family member (see Figure 1.3).

What follows only begins to suggest the relevance of subjectivity in approaching the appreciation and understanding of material culture as it manifests in the impulse to collect. In this regard, Jean Baudrillard (1994) observes:

> The objects in our lives, as distinct from the way we make use of them at a given moment, represent something much more, something profoundly related to subjectivity: for while the object is a resistant material body, it is also, simultaneously, a mental realm over which I hold sway, a thing whose meaning is governed by myself alone. It is all my own, the object of my passion. (p. 7)

## OBJECTS OF PASSION

The gathering of objects extracted from their original context and recontextualized in relationship to the collector's interests is ubiquitous across history and cultures. Collecting and collections are of interest to historians, psychologists, neurologists, and educators. For example, historian, James Clifford (1988) is confident that "[s]ome sort of "gathering" around the self and the group—the assemblage of a material "world," the marking-off of a subjective domain that is not "other"—is probably universal" (p. 218). Clifford helps us understand that collecting allows us to recognize that we are both like and unlike those around us, individually and communally.

Of course, integral to the act of collecting is the thing that is collected as well as the motivation to collect. Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (1993) believes our impulse to collect is associated with a psychological dependence on objects. In his view, "Most of the things we make these days do not make life better in any material sense but instead serve to stabilize and order the mind" (p. 22). In this regard,

> Artifacts help objectify the self in at least three major ways. They do so first by demonstrating the owner's power, vital erotic energy, and place in the social hierarchy. Second, objects reveal the continuity of the self through time, by providing foci of involvement in the present, mementos and souvenirs of the past, and signposts to future goals. Third, objects give concrete evidence of one's place in a social network as symbols (literally, the joining together) of valued relationships. In these three ways things stabilize our sense of who we are; they give a permanent shape to our views of ourselves that otherwise would quickly dissolve in the flux of consciousness. (p. 23)

Are humans unique in their proclivity to collect? Steven W. Anderson, Hanna Damasio, and Antonio R. Damasio (2005) recognize



collecting behavior in humans as well as in other species (for example, crows and ravens). They believe their research demonstrates that collecting is "supported by subcortical systems involved in biological regulation. In humans, however, it is apparent that the 'collecting drives' are modulated by cognitive processes that take social and other environmental factors into account and require the agency of other neural systems" (p. 202). Their research also assists us in understanding the difference between collecting and hoarding. Their research supports a hypothesis "that abnormal collecting behavior can result from damage to mesial prefrontal regions" of the brain (p. 207). In our experience, collectors are those who bring to their collections a sense of organization and satisfaction. The collections of hoarders, on the other hand, are less a source of satisfaction and more often illustrate an unsatisfied compulsiveness.

The ubiquitous experience of collecting also crosses age groups, with implications for education. About children and collecting, Clifford (1988) recognizes that

> Children's collections are revealing in this light: a boy's accumulation of miniature cars, a girl's dolls, a summer vacation "nature museum" (with labeled stones and shells, a hummingbird in a bottle), a treasured bowl filled with the bright shavings of crayons. In these small rituals we observe the channelings of obsession, an exercise in how to make the world one's own, to gather things around oneself tastefully, appropriately. (p. 218)

Collections can be important sources of knowledge and understanding within educational contexts. Michele and Robert Root-Bernstein (2011) provide additional insight into the importance of collecting to children and youth as well as the relationship between collecting and pedagogy. In their view, teachers can design an educational environment around the collecting interests of students. Through collecting, children learn to systematize and categorize things and ideas based on attributes such as color, emotions, letters, and sounds. Collected objects can also be the source of games and be used as storytelling devices. Root-Bernstein and Root-Bernstein advocate for an approach that promotes "free-choice" collecting. They see free-choice collecting as a "kind of play that results in something to play with." Such play leads to the "intrinsic satisfaction of the thing itself" inspiring "an absorbing make believe" that "exercises critical and cognitive skills" (p. 1).

Jeanne Nemeth (2011), writing within the context of art education, encourages art educators to acknowledge collecting behavior in children as a way to assist children and youth in understanding and appreciating their histories and communal experiences while simultaneously providing a link to aesthetics and art.

The relationship of collecting to art is well known. Historically, art collections have been associated with royalty, merchants, scholars, museums, educational institutions, government entities, as well as corporations. Private collections tend to be ephemeral and are eventually dispersed through the market or become the core or important amendments to public collections. For example, the Frick Collection and the Morgan Library in New York City, and the Phillips Collection and Freer Gallery of Art in Washington, DC, all began as private collections. Andrew W. Mellon's collection of European paintings and sculpture is core to the National Gallery of Art in Washington, DC. Robert Lehman's collection of paintings, textiles, sculpture, and decorative arts is integral to the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City.

A relatively recent example of a private collection moving into the public domain is the case of the Herbert and Dorothy Vogel collection. Herbert Vogel made his living as a postal worker and Dorothy Vogel as a librarian. Over a 45-year period, despite a relatively modest income, they amassed a collection of 4,000 pieces of contemporary art that have now been donated to museums across the United States, including the National Gallery of Art, the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles, the New Orleans Museum of Art, and the Harvard Art Museum (Vogel, 2008).

Some museum collections of art are distinguished by the encyclopedic nature of their holdings, such as those found at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, while others are more specialized based on time period (for example, the Museum of Modern Art), geographic location (such as the Sackler Gallery, Washington, DC, with its focus on Asia), or category (for example, the American Folk Art Museum).

## BEYOND THE VISUAL IN MATERIAL CULTURE STUDIES

Given the primacy of the visual, it is not surprising that when one thinks of collections, what most frequently comes to mind are collections associated with the visual. However, recognizing that culture is fomented and expressed beyond the visual is distinctive of material culture. The *Cabinets of curiosities* or *Wunderkammers*, originating during the European Renaissance, exemplify collections of multisensory detritus that included geologic specimens, artworks, religious icons, perfumes, antiques, biological specimens, zoological specimens, clocks, automata, architectural miniatures, ethnographic artifacts, and medical specimens, among most anything else that can be imagined.

Associated with these cabinets were gatherings where the curiosities were removed from their cases and experienced firsthand by guests of the owner. This tradition has continued to the present day through the



installations of artist Mark Dion in various museums, including the Weisman in Minneapolis and the Wexner Center in Columbus, as well as David Hildegrand Wilson's Museum of Jurassic Technology in Los Angeles.

Given the multisensory character of material culture in that it extends beyond the visual, collections may focus on one of the other bodily senses. Consider, for example, the sense of smell, possibly the most devalued of the human senses. The *Stasi*, or East German secret police, maintained a collection of the smells of selected Germans in case they were ever needed for tracking by hunting dogs (Doctorow, 2007). Artist Andy Warhol (1975) wrote about creating a smell collection. Artist Sissel Tolaas, known as the world's preeminent odor artist, has amassed a collection of more than 7,000 scents that include human perspiration, dirt, toys, and rotten bananas (McGrane, 2007). Current projects include collecting smells from cities throughout the world such as Cape Town, Istanbul, Nuuk, Mexico City, and Detroit (Gera, 2013).

*Smell and the City* (smellandthecity.wordpress.com/) is a web-based project dedicated to building enthusiasm for smell. Participants on the website post advice on collecting smells, smell narratives, and smell pedagogy.

## COLLECTORS AND COLLECTING ON THE INTERNET

*Smell and the City* exemplifies how the Internet has been a boon to collectors and collecting. Consider, for example, the commercial craft-oriented website Etsy. A search on Etsy for "collectibles" returns close to three-quarters of a million references across eight specific categories such as "art," "accessories," and "ceramics and pottery," as well as more comprehensive categories like "everything else," "collectibles," and "handmade." Although Marjorie Akin (1996) may ultimately be correct in arguing, at least for manufactured collectibles, that "There is no way to gauge the percentage of humanly manufactured goods that have passed through collections at some point," she concedes that "the volume must be staggering" (p. 102). Indeed, a Google search for "collections" or "collectibles" suggests the myriad objects that are collected as well as the breadth and depth of the collecting impulse like never before. Similar searches on Pinterest, Instagram, YouTube, Flickr, and Facebook reveal, using Akin's word, "staggering" results.

Collectors are also using the Internet as a way to display collections. TYPOLOGY consists of the website thetypology.com along with a constellation of social media. The topologist is Diana Zlatanovski, a self-described musicologist, anthropologist, and photographer. According to her website, she is also a curatorial research associate at the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston. Zlatanovski (n.d.) describes *typology* as