

Stories of Things: History of Design and Material Culture

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Quite appropriately, multiculturalism and cultural diversity in the History of Design arise from the hybridisation of the discipline itself, and many of the texts mentioned below can barely be described as design history. However, they all raise essential issues that the discipline is facing as it broadens its field of enquiry. Design history increasingly engages with ethnography (Douglas and Isherwood, 1996 [1979], Appadurai, 1986b) consumption studies (Miller, 1995, Brewer and Porter, 1993) and material culture (Miller, 1998b). As a result it has addressed new themes such as the transformation of the meanings and value of goods across time and space raised by Spooner (Spooner, 1986), reappropriation and the role of cultural context (Appadurai, 1986a, Miller, 1998a) as well as the 'cultural biography of things' (Kopytoff, 1986).

It has also been sensitive to the construction of discourses of national identity and national style in the context of imperialist expansion (Crowley, 1992) and globalization (Chun, 1996), their relation to the consumption and production of things and the cultural narratives that surround them. Consequently, recent design historical studies have approached modernity as a local phenomenon and not just as a universal Pevsnerian model (Pevsner, 1991 [1936]). They have followed the effects of uneven development and the links between centre and periphery (Fernandez, 1999, Orlove Benjamin, 1997), exploring the plurality of Design Histories (Calvera and Mallol, 1999). Moreover, studies of early modes of consumption (from the 15th to 18th centuries) and of the trade in luxury goods have highlighted the longstanding relations between Europe and other geographical areas (Wills, 1993, Jardine, 1996).

The relationship between East and West is also being studied in the context of contemporary global markets. For instance, Skov explores the construction and instrumentalisation of ethnic stereotypes in the world of international high fashion design (Skov, 1996). Moeran addresses similar issues in the advertising of Japanese consumer goods for Western markets (Moeran, 1996). Issues such as the impact of Western consumerism in former Eastern block countries, and their effect on local material cultures are also increasingly being addressed (Rausing, 1998).

Finally, the politics of museum display, in particular of objects in ethnographic collections, have raised issues of representation, addressing multiculturalism and the positioning of artefacts that have issued from very diverse modes of production (Kirshenblatt, 1991, Lavine and Karp, 1991). The boundaries of design history, which were until recently clearly defined by the outcomes of industrialization and mass-production, are in flux, creating the opportunity to diversify the field.

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