This article introduces a special issue of Museum Anthropology devoted to innovative strategies for teaching with objects. Although a century ago anthropology, museums, and objects were intimately entwined, trends in many museology and anthropology courses have drifted toward focusing on ideas and people rather than objects. The contributors to this special issue have cultivated new pedagogical approaches that complement or realign literature-focused classroom canons that can distance students from the very objects under study. In keeping with recent theoretical approaches to objects that highlight the sensory dimensions of material culture, many of the articles in this special issue examine the challenges and potential rewards when educators foster physical engagement with objects in and beyond the classroom. Taken together, the articles also underscore how object-based teaching can yield new theoretical and practical insights, enhance the social relevance of classroom activities, and facilitate meaningful benefits for local communities.

New Pedagogical Strategies for Experiencing and Learning from Objects

This special issue on “Emergent Visions for Object-Based Teaching in and beyond the Classroom” had its beginnings in a 2013 American Anthropological Association Invited Roundtable Session sponsored by the Council for Museum Anthropology and the Society for Visual Anthropology. Held in Chicago, this gathering brought together museum anthropologists from higher education institutions and museums to share insights into successful object-based teaching strategies in settings ranging from undergraduate anthropology classrooms, arts schools, and museum studies graduate seminars to public museums. All but two of the presenters from the roundtable session have contributed articles to this special issue, which also includes an additional, complementary article solicited from a scholar not present at the roundtable (Mark Turin).

Chicago’s distinguished museum anthropology history made it a particularly apt venue for an initial round of explorations on this topic. Chicago’s 1893 World’s Columbian Exposition launched Franz Boas’s career and generated the core of the Field Museum’s extensive anthropology collections (Stocking 1988). It would even be reasonable to suggest that it was at this 1893 Chicago exposition that museum anthropology gained a broader public following. By the turn of the last century, anthropological objects were conceived of as central epistemological material for our discipline, and museums were integral parts of academic departments (Morphy and Perkins 2006:5). Many large and smaller educational institutions, such as Harvard University, the University of California–Berkeley, the University of Washington–Seattle, and Beloit College, had anthropology or natural history museums whose collections were essential to both research and teaching.

As all museum anthropologists know, some of the earliest 19th-century attempts at anthropological theory–building hinged on the analysis of museum artifacts in order to devise grand theories of unilineal cultural evolution. Likewise, museum displays such as those in the Pitt Rivers Museum arranged artifacts typologically, from the technologically simple to the technologically complex, thereby offering visitors visual tutelage in now-defunct Eurocentric theories concerning the progression of human cultural evolution (Chapman 1988). However, by the early 20th century, as these early theories came under fire as not only empirically and methodologically unsound but racist, British anthropologists began to shift their research methodologies away from museums and toward long-term ethnographic fieldwork and synchronic theoretical models of society (Morphy and Perkins 2006:6). Theories such as Alfred Radcliffe-Brown’s (1952) structural functionalism emphasized social organization and carried anthropological research and teaching away from the tainted zones of unilineal cultural evolution, museums, and material culture. Across the Atlantic in the United States, opponents of unilineal evolutionary theories such as Boas initially envisioned museum collections as potential avenues for understanding historical intergroup relations (Morphy and Perkins 2006:5).
However, by 1905, Boas became convinced that a satisfactory representation of culture via material objects was impossible and resigned from his post at the American Museum of Natural History (Cruikshank 1992:5). As Donald Collier and Harry Tschopik observed in their 1954 discussion of the role of museums in American anthropology, Boas's departure from the museum world also entailed a transplant of the new science of anthropology from the museum realm to that of the university. This move, then, signaled the beginnings of a rift between the museum-based study of material culture and the university-based anthropological study of ideology and human behavior (Collier and Tschopik 1954).

This 20th-century fissure between the object-centered world of museum anthropology and the idea-centered world of university-based sociocultural anthropology persisted into the 1980s, abetted by successive waves of fashionable theories from psychological anthropology to Saussurian semiotics in which objects and materiality were eclipsed. As Bruce Trigger recounts (Cruikshank 1992:5), museums’ marginalization from anthropology was further exacerbated when museums came to be associated with histories of colonial relations from which some anthropologists wished to detach themselves. Although there were certainly exceptions to these broader trends, it was not until the late 1970s and 1980s that academic anthropology began to rediscover the value of museum collections. This era saw a shift in perception of material culture: no longer were objects seen as simply passive mirrors of social relations; rather, objects came to be recognized as potentially active forces in intergroup relations (Graburn 1976), and museum artifacts were productively re-envisioned as having “social lives” (Appadurai 1988; Stocking 1988). These shifts paved the way for more recent interventions that spotlight materiality and the sensory aspects of objects, including their haptic, aromatic dimensions as well as the emotional engagement objects prompt in those around them (Dudley 2010; Edwards et al. 2006; Miller 2008).

Ironically, with classrooms increasingly relying on two-dimensional PowerPoint® images and recent publications questioning the relationship between museums and objects (Conn 2010), the ground for object-centered teaching seems to have eroded at the very moment that museum collections are being rediscovered by academic anthropologists. Yet, even as some have questioned the relevance of objects in museum settings, the recent “material turn” in anthropology has shown that classrooms and exhibition spaces must engage more rigorously and inventively with the fact that humans interact via material things.

Although some may contend that institutions and social behaviors can be examined in the abstract, the contributors to this special issue all share the belief that the teaching of anthropology is enhanced when it embraces sensorial engagement with materiality. This special issue brings together scholars who have developed creative and innovative ways to integrate material worlds into and sometimes beyond their classrooms. Whether it is by manufacturing 3D scans of museum objects to revisit questions about replicas and models, requiring students to buy/sell objects in online auctions to spotlight the role of words and images in capitalist value creation, creating virtual displays of archival materials, curating socially relevant exhibits with anthropology students, or having classes engage in urban museum collections projects, all of the contributors offer insights into the role of materiality and object-centered teaching for a future generation of students.

Back to the Future: Finding Paths to Bridge the Theoretical and the Material Worlds in Anthropology and Museology Classrooms

Many of us teaching the anthropology of art or museology in university settings share a set of formative graduate school experiences that subsequently become templates for our own initial approaches to organizing our classes and seminars. For some of us who have come of age as museum-oriented anthropologists in the past two to three decades, our graduate school training frequently consisted of bifurcated classroom training experiences. My own experience as a graduate student in the 1980s entailed taking heavily object-centered museology graduate classes in the campus museum and theoretically oriented anthropology of (ethnic) art classes in the anthropology building. Never once did an artifact cross the threshold of my theory-oriented anthropology of art classes, and only occasionally did we view images of material culture in the classroom (generally slide
shows of the professors’ fieldwork with material culture). While we gained extensive knowledge of the history of anthropological theories pertaining to objects, the actual material world was palpably absent from the classroom. Conversely, our graduate classes in museum studies were located in the museum itself, and our weekly seminars required active engagement with material objects and the exhibits. The lessons in this setting, however, were almost entirely pragmatic and apolitical (with the exception of discussions pertaining to repatriation). Although the professors of these two sets of classes authored insightful, theoretically informed research on material culture, the contrasting locations and orientations of these two sets of classes inadvertently reified some of the very stereotypes that have dogged museum anthropology. That is, these contrasting sets of classes echoed the Western world’s pervasive, culturally constructed divide between the mundane material world of things and the lofty cultural world of ideas and theories.

This dualistic “divide” reigning on many, though not all, university campuses for a number of decades has been lamented and problematized by various scholars, perhaps most memorably by Jules Prown (1996), who compared the division to that between the “farmer” and the “cowman” in his article “Material/Culture: Can the Farmer and the Cowman Still be Friends?” Drawing inspiration from the musical Oklahoma!, Prown writes of the schism between “farmers”—generally curators who engage primarily in the often-deductive close-grained analysis of objects—and “cowmen”—generally scholars whose foremost interests are in culture and who tend to be more interested in the belief structures that produced the object. Prown’s laments about the problematic nature of this divide coincide with various theoretical shifts that have facilitated a rethinking of the divide, most notably the aforementioned “material turn” (Tilley et al. 2013) and the “sensory turn” in anthropology (Edwards et al. 2006). These emergent orientations have not only returned the world of museum anthropology and object-focused studies to a more central stage in the broader field but have also carved out a space where “farmers” and “cowmen” can loosen their respective stereotypic garb. As Christopher Pinney observed of these shifts in the field,

a new space is emerging in which the visual and the material can be thought of as something other than “secondary screens” onto which more primal concerns are projected, the visual and material [are] . . . originating points. [Shore and Trnka 2013:167]

Despite these object-centered and haptic interventions in the theoretical realm, for the most part, our pedagogical approaches have yet to catch up. While many of us have taken or taught anthropology of art classes that featured one or more field trips to local museums, these trips are often bracketed off from the everyday classroom realm of theoretical readings and academic discussions. Certainly, these museum field trips were undeniably valuable experiences in which students acquired knowledge pertaining to specific museum exhibition topics, came to better understand museum operations and curatorial responsibilities, or gained new appreciations of museum settings’ emergent postcolonial role as venues for cultural bridge building (Simpson 1996; Terrell 1993). However, due to security or conservation concerns, students’ engagement with material culture in formal museum sites often tends to remain strictly visual, mediated by glass display cases, rather than tactile. It is worth noting, though, that this is beginning to change, as the object-based learning initiative at University College London Museums and the path-breaking work of Helen Chatterjee (2008, 2009) on touch and the value of object handling in museums exemplifies.

In my case, it was a fortuitous initial position teaching the “Anthropology of Art” in a liberal arts college classroom with an adjacent ethnographic collection that fostered heavy use of museum materials in my teaching. This experience also fueled an appreciation of how the presence of objects could spark new sensory-based insights in theoretically oriented classes (albeit through gloves). However, a move to a university that did not have its own anthropology collection pushed me back into the comfortable but less engaging zone of teaching via two-dimensional PowerPoint images of objects. Eventually, I developed my own collection of teaching artifacts and came to appreciate all the more the ways in which object-based teaching can not only vividly convey but also fuel theory building. I briefly share one class exercise as an illustration.
UP CLOSE AND PERSONAL WITH PANAMANIAN MOLAS: FROM CLASSROOM LESSONS ON ETHNO-AESTHETICS TO CROSS-CULTURAL INSIGHTS

Since 1994, my biennial undergraduate class on the “Anthropology of Art” has included a module on ethno-aesthetics. Typically, in tandem with this module, students read selected articles from Jeremy Coote and Anthony Shelton’s (1992) *Anthropology, Art and Aesthetics*. To initiate the module, I draw from my small personal collection of Panamanian *mola* textiles, the colorful, multilayered, reverse appliqué blouse panels made by San Blas Kuna women. Depending on the class size, I lay out between ten and fifteen molas and give students time to examine them carefully, encouraging them to handle the pieces. I then instruct them to write down which ones are their two favorite molas with a sentence or two addressing why they appeal. When the students have all finished jotting down their favorites, I ask them to stand adjacent to the mola that most appeals to them. Invariably, some molas draw a cluster of students while others fail to attract any devotees. Students clearly notice which molas are “popular” and which are “the rejects” and will occasionally tease a classmate for being the sole participant standing by an “ugly” textile. I then invite students to explain their selection criteria. Most tend to mention favorite color combinations or the appeal of the pictorial motifs on a particular mola (a topic I pursue below). Finally, I go on to outline Kuna women’s criteria for making aesthetic evaluations of molas, drawing from the extensive research of Mari Lyn Salvador (1997, 2003) and others.

For years, the exercise has centered on prompting students to recognize how their own aesthetic criteria can differ significantly from that of producer groups and to hypothesize about culturally based ideologies underlying these ethno-aesthetic differences. This leads to discussions of past attempts by anthropologists to discern ethno-aesthetic patterns, ranging from early, often-problematic studies of material culture and cognition (Child and Siroto 1965; Robbins 1966) to more recent works that suggest studies of visual aesthetics have been hampered by an undue focus on material objects (Coote 1992; Forrest 1988; Geurts and Adikah 2006).

Through years of running this exercise, several patterns of student reactions emerged that led to further reflections pertaining to our cultural training to engage on a primarily visual level with ethnographic objects. For instance, despite my invitations to handle the molas, students seldom pick them up. Their default mode generally entails strictly visual engagement. When students eventually cave to my repeated entreaties to take the items into their hands for closer investigation, it is the rare student who turns a mola over to examine its back side, and I have never seen a student smell a mola. My subsequent questions as to why they did not smell the molas invariably prompt uncomfortable laughter, providing an opportunity for me to outline the emergent “sensory turn” in anthropology.

Student reactions also prompt further reflections regarding our own cultural aesthetic criteria. When I ask students why they did not examine the stitching on the back side, they invariably suggest that it was because the back side was the “hidden” side and therefore did not matter. I routinely counter by suggesting that because careful, even stitching was an important aspect of Kuna aesthetic evaluations, it is likely that a Kuna woman would pay close attention to not only the front but the back side of a mola, as stitch size and uniformity are especially easy to discern on the back side. For both myself and the students, these in-class discussions have highlighted the heightened emphasis we place on the “front” sides of two-dimensional aesthetic objects as well as our tendency to disregard what “does not show” in making our own aesthetic judgments (Figure 1).

It is significant that the rare students who do investigate the back side of the molas tend to be those who have personal hobbies such as knitting, sewing, or needlepoint that prompted their curiosity about the stitching, which they felt was best understood from the backside. Their revelations concerning their craft skills have enabled me to underscore the value of apprenticeship and participant observation in anthropological studies of material culture. In these discussions, as further illustration of how one gains new ways of seeing and experiencing objects via hands-on production experience, I offer examples of unexpected insights gleaned from my own apprenticeship with Toraja carvers in Indonesia (Adams 2006), Causey’s (2003) participant observation with Batak carvers in Indonesia, and a colleague’s ethno-archaeology work with contemporary potters in Mexico (Arnold 2004).
While my American students designated a variety of molas as their favorites, some selection trends have emerged over the years. My female American students, in particular, have tended to favor certain molas over others. Especially popular have been three molas with simple, yet bold, colorful motifs, one featuring a slumbering sloth, a second depicting birds, and another featuring a frog (see Figure 1). These molas contrast markedly with those that anthropological research suggests Kuna women might prefer. As Salvador (2003:60) notes, Kuna consider molas beautiful if there are multiple layers with little empty space, the design features repetition with subtle variation, and the lines are straight but narrow, with parallel sides, even spacing, and clear-cut edges. When asked to articulate their reasons for selecting the relatively simple animal designs with wider, occasionally uneven lines, my American students often described the animals as appealing, whimsical, or cute. Several have spoken of having had pet birds of their own or of being interested in primatology. In short, subject matter trumped execution skills.

I had the opportunity to conduct the same exercise while serving as a visiting professor at a university in Almaty, Kazakhstan. As with my American students, my Kazakhstani students were largely middle class and predominantly from urban areas. Although some aspects of their responses were similar to those of my American students, for instance, both groups did not handle the molas despite my entreaties, other dimensions of their responses contrasted markedly from both Kuna mola makers and my American students. Most of my Kazakhstani students favored a mola featuring a pair of pale blue parrots flanking two bold red and white flowers. As with the designs preferred by my American students, this particular mola had wider, uneven lines and stitching. When asked why they favored this particular mola, my Kazakhstani students unhesitatingly cited the predominance of a vibrant shade of red, which evoked positive associations with their own crimson yurt decorations. They also noted the mola’s curvilinear cutaway designs and flowers and likened them to the curvilinear and abstract floral designs favored in some of the textiles used to decorate yurts. In short, this informal classroom exercise conceived as an avenue for introducing the anthropological literature on ethno-aesthetics ultimately pointed us all toward unanticipated, new understandings of the nexus between aesthetic preferences and culturally patterned ways of seeing.

Figure 1. A subset of the Panamanian Kuna molas used in the author’s class exercises on ethno-aesthetics. The mola in the upper left corner (depicting a pair of blue parrots) was favored by many of the author’s Kazakhstani students, as well as by a sizable number of American females enrolled in the author’s “Anthropology of Art” classes. (Photo by Kathleen Adams.)
The Contributions in this Special Issue

Each of the contributors shares strategies they have devised for integrating object-based classroom learning with theory and praxis. The first three articles (Kreps, Krmpotich, and Turin) discuss extended case studies of specific classroom practices entailing direct engagement with material objects or special collections. These authors discuss not only the logistical challenges and academic rewards of these academic experiments but also the new theoretical insights, enhanced social relevance, and public engagement fostered by these projects. The final article, by Andrew Causey, offers a rich assortment of object-centered classroom exercises that can be adapted to most classes.

Central to many of the articles in this special issue is the theme of reorienting classroom learning toward more experiential modes of understanding. As noted above, the sensory turn in anthropology and museum studies informs some of this intervention. The rise over the past decade of university initiatives to foster experiential learning experiences for students has also created a fertile campus environment for introducing more tactile, sensory approaches in our classrooms. In the first article, Christina Kreps uses her work at the University of Denver Museum of Anthropology as a case study to illustrate her move away from a conventional, text-based anthropology of art pedagogy toward a pedagogical style that fostered more experiential learning and enabled her to provide students with hands-on experience in exhibition research, design, and development. The projects she describes include integrating the design of an exhibition (Objects and Lives) based on several donors’ gifts into her course. In so doing, she provides students and visitors with a vivid demonstration of the biographies of objects, their routes of circulation, and the ways in which they accrue shifting meanings and values in different cultural contexts: ultimately, her intervention of moving away from a survey of classic studies in the anthropology of art enables her to promote a more dynamic understanding of things in museums and their agency (Gell 1998).

The second article by Cara Krmpotich also discusses the creation of a collection as an avenue for prompting students to understand the work of museum professionals in a more haptic, visceral fashion. In this case, the students are future professionals—Museum Studies graduate students at the University of Toronto—and Krmpotich aims to emphasize via the collection creation process that collections management is not only an embodied practice but an active area for research. As they gathered collections of outdated technologies from campus faculty as well as items from Marshall McLuhan’s Coach House, students were prompted to reflect on how a collections approach differs from a curatorial approach and entails a distinct way of viewing and imagining objects that interweaves particular museum departments, historical eras, and theoretical models. In so doing, Krmpotich also decenters older visions of collections-based work in museums as existing outside the realm of intellectual labor. Likewise, Krmpotich describes her in-class use of 3D scanning and 3D printing to counter students’ entrenched opinions about “value” and “authenticity” as well as to raise questions about the kinds of objects museums value.

The third article, by Mark Turin, chronicles the challenges and rewards of teaching an upper-division undergraduate class at Yale University on “The Himalayan Collections at Yale.” Funded by a grant, drawing on four co-instructors, and migrating between various on-campus locales, this pioneering class was an ambitious venture ostensibly aimed at training students to use outside-the-box technology to create media-rich virtual collections and crowdsourced open catalogue entries pertaining to Himalayan-related holdings at Yale. The materials students were assigned to work with were wide ranging, from Tibetan Buddhist scrolls to missionary archives to the personal and political papers of a former ambassador to the region. As Turin shows, in their hand-on work with these wide-ranging ethnographic materials, students were invited to think in new ways not only about the objects themselves and their cultural biographies but also about potentially transformative roles of digital media, as both an avenue for facilitating access to older ethnographic collections and for altering social relations. In short, Turin’s contribution offers us a compelling example of how objects-based teaching in tandem with digital media can foster a socially engaged learning environment. As I write this just a few days after the tragic Nepal earthquake, I am struck by how Turin’s work with these students to create a virtual collection and crowd-sourced catalogue of Himalayan materials has now accrued a poignant new layer of social relevance.
Finally, the closing article by Andrew Causey grows out of the unique challenges he confronted teaching an Anthropology of Material Culture class to non-majors in an arts college. Unlike many of the museology and cultural anthropology majors discussed in most of the other articles in this special issue, Causey’s students generally do not share an intrinsic curiosity about objects—they are in his class to fulfill breadth requirements. Causey offers us a pedagogically oriented vision for engaging non-majors in object-centered learning. He outlines five broad approaches to material culture (object as personal identity, object as “thing in the world,” object as skilled manufacture, object as commodity, and object as cultural artifact) and provides a cornucopia of object-based classroom projects designed to enhance students’ appreciations of the importance of material things in our lives. Much in the spirit of John Shuh’s (1999) classic “Teaching Yourself to Teach with Objects,” Causey’s closing article offers a practical, hands-on set of guidelines for implementing these exercises.

Taken together, all of the contributions to this special issue share a vision of drawing inspiration from anthropology’s object- and museum-centered heritage and returning to more object-centered pedagogies. As the title to this special issue suggests, however, this intervention is envisioned as a journey back to the future, as emergent trends in the anthropology of art and museology underscore the need for more sensorial understandings of material culture, as well as the need to render our classroom work more socially relevant.

NOTES

1. For a further discussion of how the Saussurian use of language as the analytical model led to scholarly blindness regarding the material properties of things, see Myers (2001). It should be noted that cultural anthropology was not alone in moving away from teaching with material objects. The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation’s 2007 College and University Art Museum Program Report details a similar rift between university art history departments and university art museums, which has prompted a systematic attempt to bridge the two. I thank an anonymous reviewer of this manuscript for bringing this to my attention.

2. The 1960s, for instance, was an era in which there was a revival of interest in material culture among sociocultural anthropologists thanks, in part, to theoretical interests in symbolic and visual anthropology, as observed by Morphy and Perkins (2006:9–10).


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