

Misericordia University  
Department of History and Government

## **HIS 320: Seminar in American Material Culture**

### **Course Information**

*Course Credits:* 3  
*Semester:* Fall 2023  
*Prerequisites:* None

### *Faculty Information:*

**Dr. Jennifer M. Black, History Dept.**

### **Course Description**

This course provides intermediate instruction in the field of public history, following a special-topics approach. Students in the course will hone their research and critical thinking skills through written assignments, public history research projects, and / or presentations.

### *Introduction*

This course provides an introduction to the study of “history from things.” In this course we will investigate the rich potential of things—artworks, objects, landscapes, buildings, consumable goods, tools, and others—as primary evidence about American society and culture, past and present. It builds from the assumption that material objects are important, value-laden primary sources that can expand our understanding of past cultures and societies. Through readings, discussion, and lots of direct observation, we will analyze a variety of artifacts to discover the meanings that these cultural products held for their creators as well as their consumers. Throughout the semester, we will examine the methodologies and practice of material culture studies, juxtaposing our practice with illustrative examples from scholars working with material culture. Students will gain familiarity with the literature in material culture studies, and issues related to museum collections and representation.

### **Required Texts**

Georgia Brady Barnhill and Martha J. McNamara, eds. *New Views of New England: Studies in Material and Visual Culture, 1680-1830* (University of Virginia Press / Colonial Society of Massachusetts, 2012).

Joan Cashin, ed. *War Matters: Material Culture in the Civil War Era*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2018.

Amy Henderson and Adrienne L. Kaeppler, eds. *Exhibiting Dilemmas: Issues of Representation at the Smithsonian*, ed. (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Books, 1997).

Steven Lubar, and David W. Kingery, eds. *History from Things: Essays on Material Culture*. Smithsonian, 1995.

\*Additional articles available on Blackboard.

### **Course Goals & Objectives**

This course addresses the following programmatic and university goals / objectives:

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<b>Course Objectives:</b>	<b>In completing this course, students will:</b>	<b>Assessment Methods</b>
Identify source types, and potential information to be gleaned from, the study of material culture in the US	1.A: Recognize and explain historical processes, continuity, and change. 1.B: Develop a body of historical knowledge with breadth of time and place—as well as depth of detail—in order to discern context.	Discussion; assignments
Develop an understanding of key issues in the literature of material culture studies	3.A: Describe past events from multiple perspectives. 3.B: Identify, summarize, appraise, and synthesize other scholars' historical arguments. 3.c: Evaluate historical arguments, explaining how they were constructed and might be improved.	Discussion; assignments
Identify and apply appropriate methodologies for material culture analysis	2.A: Recognize history as an interpretive account of the human past—one that historians create in the present from surviving evidence. 2.B: Collect, question, organize, synthesize, and interpret a variety of historical sources. 2.C: Practice ethical historical inquiry through proper acknowledgement of sources.	Discussion; assignments
Synthesize source analyses with appropriate context and existing literature, using accessible language and sound public history methodologies	4.a: Generate substantive, open-ended questions about the past and employ research strategies to answer them. 4.b: Craft well-supported historical narratives, arguments, and reports of research findings 4.c: Synthesize research with existing narratives, making an original argument.	Project

<b>Course Objectives:</b>	<b>Program Learning Outcome</b>	<b>University Learning Outcome</b>
Identify source types, and potential information to be gleaned from, the study of material culture in the US	Goal 1: Develop historical knowledge	UG #s 5, 6, 8
Develop an understanding of key issues in the literature of material culture studies	Goal: 3. Recognize the provisional nature of historical knowledge	UG #s 3, 4, 7, 8
Identify and apply appropriate methodologies for material culture analysis	Goal 2: Evaluate and employ historical methods	UG#3, 4, 8
Synthesize source analyses with appropriate context and existing literature, using accessible language and sound public history methodologies	Goal 4. Create historical arguments and narratives.	UG# 3, 4, 7, 8

### **Course Delivery**

#### *Evaluation Methods & Student Assignments*

There are a series of short papers and a final exam in the course. The final course grade will be weighted as follows:

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<u>Item</u>	<u>Weight</u>
Participation	15%
Object Analyses (3)	30%
Reading Responses (5)	30%
Final Exam	25%
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>100%</b>

### *Discussions & Participation*

In this course you will be graded on your active participation in class discussions. This gives you a chance to verbally demonstrate your understanding of the course material; participation thus includes raising your hand to ask or answer questions during lecture, and to respond to other students' comments and questions. Each class, I will calculate a grade for your participation points based on your contributions to class discussion, according to the following distribution: full participation (A) = 4pts; some participation (C-B range) = 2.5-3.5pts; present but no participation (D) = 2pts; absences beyond the two freebies = 0pts. Under this rubric, a student who attends all class meetings but does not contribute to class discussion will receive a D for participation.

I will post reading discussion questions on the Blackboard each week, for our upcoming discussion of the assigned readings. I encourage you to prepare answers to these questions in advance of our Tuesday meeting, as they will be used to help guide our discussion.

### *Reading Response Papers*

You are required to submit five response papers throughout the semester, related to the course readings. Each week, I will post discussion questions to guide your reading comprehension. You may self-select the weeks for which you'd like to submit a response, and you need not inform me in advance of your selection. When you'd like to submit a response paper, you should choose two of the posted discussion questions for that week and formulate a written response to each question, of about 200-300 words each (for a total of 400-600 words), with citations (if appropriate). Please indicate the week number and questions you've selected on your paper. You should follow paper formatting guidelines as noted on the syllabus. These papers are due at the beginning of class on Tuesday (both in hard copy and to Bb) and will not be accepted late. On Blackboard, submit these in the order of completion—i.e., the first response paper you submit is RR paper 1, regardless of the date. The next response paper is RR paper 2, etc.

### *Object Analyses:*

Each week, we will have multiple opportunities to engage in object analysis in the classroom and elsewhere on campus (including the art gallery and university archives). At different points in the semester, you will choose an object from which you'll compose an extended analysis, linking it to course content. There are three object analyses due throughout the semester; see the schedule below for due dates. These papers will be an opportunity for you to apply what you've read and learned in the class. Detailed instructions are appended to this syllabus.

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*Grading Scale for Course Grades*

<u>Superior:</u>	<u>Very Good:</u>	<u>Satisfactory:</u>	<u>Poor:</u>
A = 93-100%	B+= 87-89%	C+ = 77-79%	D = 65-69%
A- = 90-92%	B = 83-86%	C = 73-76%	F = 64% & below
	B- = 80-82%	C- = 70-72%	

## Weekly Schedule

*Readings with an asterisk (\*) are available on Blackboard*

*Book titles are abbreviated (War Matters, New Views of New England, History from Things)*

### Week 1 (Aug 29, 31): Introduction

*Reading:* Introduction, in WM (p1-8)

Prown, "The Truth of Material Culture," in HT p1-19.

### Week 2 (Sept 5, 7): Methods in Material Culture Studies

*Reading:* \*E. McClung Fleming, "Artifact Study: A Proposed Model," in Thomas Schlereth, ed., *Material Culture Studies in America* (New York: Alta Mira Press, 1999), p163-173.

Friedel, "Some Matters of Substance," HT p41-50.

Baker, "The Archeology of 1690," NVNE p1-16.

### Week 3 (Sept 12, 14): Representing Class & Status

*Reading:* \*Paul Staiti, "Character and Class," in *John Singleton Copley in America*, ed. Carrie Rebora (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1995), 53–78.

Muller, "Navigation, Vision, and Empire," NVNE p47-68.

### Week 4 (Sept 19, 21): Architecture & the Landscape

*Reading:* Murphy, "Buildings, Landscapes, and the Representation of Authority," NVNE p69-94.

Lewis, "Common Landscapes as Historic Documents," HT p115-139.

Brown, "New England Cemetery," HT p140-159

(Campus Walk)

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**Week 5 (Sept 26, 28): Disruptions & Identity**

*Reading:* Reider, "The Remainder of Our Effects," NVNE p97-128.

Ott, "There's no Place like Home," WM p176-197

\*Object Analysis #1 Due, 9/28

**Week 6 (Oct 3, 5): Objects & Politics**

*Reading:* Hess, "Material Culture of Weapons," WM p99-122

Carmichael, "Trophies of Victory and Relics of Defeat," WM p198-221.

**Week 7 (Oct 10): Writing Session**

\*Meet in the art gallery at time TBD for object analysis

\*NO CLASS October 12 (Fall Break)

**Week 8 (Oct 17, 19): Finding Voices**

*Reading:* Weicksel, "Fitted Up for Freedom," WM p151-175

\*Burman & Fennetaux, *The Pocket*, p22-51

\*Object Analysis #2 Due, 10/19

**Week 9 (Oct 24, 26): Objects as Technology**

*Reading:* Lubar, "Machine Politics," HT p197-214.

\* Rachel S. Gross, "Layering for a Cold War: The M-1943 Combat System, Military Testing, and Clothing as Technology," *Technology and Culture* 60, no. 2 (2019): 378-408.

(visit to archives)

**Week 10 (Oct 31, Nov 2): Objects & Cultural Life**

*Reading:* Kelly, "The Color of Whiteness: Picturing Race on Ivory," NVNE p129-154.

Zboray & Zboray, "Saved by a Testament," WM p75-98.

(visit to archives)

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**Week 11 (Nov 7, 9): Objects & Environmental History**

*Reading:* “Nature as Material Culture,” in WM p53-74

\*Jennifer L. Anderson, *Mahogany: The Costs of Luxury in Early America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2012), intro (p1-17) & chapter 6 (p184-209)

**Week 12 (Nov 14, 16): Objects & Markets**

*Reading:* \*Joshua Greenberg, “Dollars and Sense,” in *Banknotes and Shinplasters* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2020), p77-105.

\*Seth Rockman, “Negro Cloth: Mastering the Market for Slave Clothing in Antebellum America.,” in *American Capitalism: New Histories*, ed. Sven Beckert and Christine Desan (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018), 170–94.

\*Object Analysis #3 due, 11/16

**Week 13 (Nov 21): Object Trouble**

*Reading:* Walsh, “Crystal Skulls and Other Problems: Or, Don’t Look It in the Eye,” ED p116-139

Arnoldi, “Herbert Ward’s ‘Ethnographic Sculptures’ of Africans,” ED p70-91

\*NO CLASS 11/23: Thanksgiving Recess

**Week 14 (Nov 28, 30): Objects & Memory**

*Reading:* Lubar, “Exhibiting Memories,” in ED p15-27

Cashin, “Relics from Two Wars,” in WM p34-52

**Week 15 (Dec 5, 7): Dealing with Controversy**

*Reading:* Hughes, “All in the Family,” ED p156-175

\*Cox, *No Common Ground* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2021), p149-169.

Wrap Up

**Final Exam TBA**

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**Object Analysis Papers**

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**Due Dates:**

- Paper 1: 9/28/23, 8am to Bb and hard copy in person
- Paper 2: 10/19/23, 8am to Bb and hard copy in person
- Paper 3: 11/16/23, 8am to Bb and hard copy in person

**Length:** min. 2 pages (600 words), for each paper

**Value:** 30% of final grade (10pts ea.)

**Directions**

Each week, we will have multiple opportunities to engage in object analysis in the classroom and elsewhere on campus (including the art gallery and university archives). At different points in the semester, you will choose an object from which you'll compose an extended analysis, linking it to course content. There are three object analyses due throughout the semester. These papers will be an opportunity for you to apply what you've read and learned in the class.

For each object analysis, you will systematically describe and analyze an object in a discreet paper that provides a thorough description; proper contextualization of production, use / reception, and effects; and relation of the item to the key ideas within your theme. Using the tips and methodologies discussed in class, write a 2-3 page paper that analyzes the item, its relation to the context of the period, and its significance. A key question to answer is, "what do we learn about the time period by looking at this item?"

For paper 1, you will choose an object related to the readings up to and / or including week 5. For paper 2, your object should be related to the readings / topics covered between weeks 5-8. For paper 3, you should choose an object related to the readings / topics from weeks 8-12.

Once you choose your object, consider which readings will be most useful in helping you apply material culture methodologies for analysis. You should reference these readings throughout your paper where relevant. In each paper, you must correlate your analysis to at least one reading from the course.

You may begin your paper with a thorough description of the object. Take note of particular details, using descriptive words and ekphrasis to help the reader recreate the object in their mind. Place the item in its historical context: What was going on in the US (or the world) at the time? Giving relevant context will help frame what we will learn from this item. The next several paragraphs should work systematically to analyze the item—start with one area, and imagine moving clockwise around the object, for example. Point out specific details, and explain their meaning. Who produced it, when, and why? What materials is it made from? What was its function originally, and might that function have changed over time? Is there any symbolism, or stylistic elements that help you determine its overall significance? How might audiences have responded to this item? What impact did it have, or legacy left behind? Finally, what do we learn about the time period, by analyzing this object?

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**Formatting:**

Papers should be typed, on plain white paper, with all the margins set to one-inch. You should double space the body of the paper only (not the headings and title). Please use Times New-Roman 12-point font size. You will be graded on both the style and content of your papers; thus, please be sure to proofread for correct grammar and spelling. Make sure your paper is clearly organized with an introduction, argument (thesis statement), topic sentences, evidence, and conclusion. Papers must meet the minimum word-count requirement to receive full credit; however no penalty will be given for papers exceeding the suggested limit. You are required to submit a hard copy in class AND upload a copy to the Blackboard (assignments listed under "Content") by the due date and time.

**Citations:**

For History papers, we prefer Chicago style. Please refer to the Chicago Manual of Style Online or the OWL at Perdue for assistance.