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Introduction

A seventeenth-century Japanese folding chair with lacquer decoration seems to be a straightforward object (fig. 0.1). It is a small, portable seat that prioritizes light weight and the ability to be folded flat, rejecting a thronelike form, extensive carving, or elaborate upholstery. It appears to be a temporary form of seating. It might be easily be mistaken for a Japanese imitation of a contemporaneous Dutch *preekstoeltje*, a small sermon chair that women carried to church (fig. 0.2). In fact, it is a complex object that reveals a great deal about the interconnected flow of forms, technologies, and values of the early modern world.

The very notion of a chair, a seating platform raised above the ground, was unusual in late-seventeenth-century Japan, where one was more likely to sit on tatami mats placed on the floor. As traders from China, Southeast Asia, South Asia, and even Europe arrived in Japan in the sixteenth century, chairs assumed particular significance in this floor culture, and folding chairs had a prestigious role in that context. On the Nanban screens made for local and European merchants, the most distinguished male trader often sat in a folding Chinese chair as silks, ceramics, and other desirable commodities were unpacked, suggesting that the merchant's folding chair was an important symbol of his prominence as purveyor of desirable products from afar, a throne also transported from another culture (fig. 0.3).

This particular lacquered chair lacks the curved crest rail (or rounded back), solid splat, and huanghuali wood common to most Chinese chairs, although the carved finials at the top of the backrest feature carved shishis, or





FACTING PAGE

Fig. 0.1. Folding chair, Nagasaki area, Japan, 1614–1716; wood with *maki-e* and *raden* lacquer decoration, linen seat. Private collection.

Fig. 0.2. Folding church chair, Netherlands, 1620–50; joined and carved rosewood. Referred to as a preekstoeltje, or sermon chair, it was used primarily by women and features carved angels' faces, dolphins, acanthus, and lions. Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, purchase 1948, BK-16073.

guardian lions, a common feature of Chinese ornament of the period. Instead the chair's arcaded back with turned spindles resembles the chairs commonly found in late-sixteenth-century Portugal and early-seventeenth-century Netherlands. Where the European artisans relied on carved decoration, the Japanese lacquerer used mother-of-pearl and gold and silver powders set into the lacquer (the raden and maki-e techniques) to decorate the various wooden parts of the chair. Unlike the Dutch example, a form carried by women to church and not used at home, the Japanese example followed Chinese usage and served as a seat of authority for male use in a distant land. The chair thus speaks to the complexities of material translation in the global world, where Japanese artisans relied on local materials to interpret forms and details from far away, resulting in a chair that conveys multiple meanings across a variety of cultures. In Japan its form and turnings suggested sophistication derived from the "Southern Barbarians," those traders and missionaries who arrived from Goa, Macau, and Malacca, and its authoritative meaning resonated with Chinese practice, while to those Europeans in India, Portugal, or the Netherlands, who focused on the lacquer, the chair stimulated a fascination with the exoticism of distant Asia.1 The manner in which a single chair responded to



Fig. 0.3. Detail from Nanban trade screen, Japan, ca. 1600; wooden frame with ink, color, gold, and gold leaf on paper. Museu Nacional de Arte Antiga, Lisbon, 1641 Mov.

and fulfilled different expectations underscores the way in which the study of a work of art can unlock the richness and complexity of the past in real and tangible ways.

Awareness of distant practices and the opportunity to translate those ideas into a new form relying on familiar techniques and local materials can also be seen in a bowl made in the mid-seventeenth century at Awatovi Pueblo in present-day Arizona (fig. 0.4). Indigenous potters there, who were women, had typically made round-bottomed dough bowls and water ollas from local earthenware that they coiled, shaped, painted with yucca fiber brushes using minerals as pigments, and hardened in a low-temperature, open-air firing. Round bottoms were appropriate, since these vessels were usually set on earth. When Spanish Franciscan friars arrived and oversaw the construction of a church with appropriate equipage, they relied on Indigenous artisanal skills and labor. With no Spanish craftspeople and limited supplies of goods transported from the center of New Spain, the missionaries apparently had the local potters make a baptismal font, alms dishes, and sacramental vessels. Following European prototypes, local potters made bowls whose shape was closer to a European soup bowl, with a flaring rim and a footed bottom that leveled it for placement on a table.2

There is no written evidence that proves that Indigenous artisans were conscripted to produce this work, a practice of forced labor common in other



Fig. 0.4. Bowl, Awatovi Pueblo, northeastern Arizona, ca. 1650; coiled earthenware with painted slip decoration. Recovered by the Awatovi Archaeological Expedition of the Peabody Museum, 1935–39. The sherds were reassembled and some blank filler used along the rim and part of the bowl to provide some integrity for the original pieces. Peabody Museum Expedition, J. E. Brew, director, 1937. Harvard College, Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, 37-111-10/9983.

parts of the Spanish empire in the Americas, or that the missionaries, who were considerably outnumbered by the Puebloans, may have depended only on a local supply. Yet the physical evidence suggests that the artisans were not entirely subservient to the Europeans but rather controlled the process and adapted the form to their own purposes. The variable thickness in sections of the plates and bowls indicates that these potters continued to coil local earthenware rather than using European techniques such as turning and trimming on a wheel or drape molding. And rather than glazing the surface, they simply burnished it with slip and then painted the edges in their own Sikyatki style. Furthermore, archaeological evidence suggests the potters and their fellow Puebloans adapted the liturgical form to a domestic use, as such dishes and



Fig. 0.5. Bedcover, wrought by Mary Drew Fifield and Mary Fifield Adams, Boston, Massachusetts, ca. 1714, and reworked by Mary Avery White, 1778–1860; English fustian ground (linen and cotton), English embroidery wool in a variety of stitches including laid, stem, link, knot, and bullion. This quilted bedcover was made sometime around the turn of the nineteenth century from two early-eighteenth-century bed curtains and a valance wrought by women in the Fifield family. The valance, which has a different sort of vine, can be seen along the top of this cover. Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, gift of Mrs. E. Emerson Evans, 1972.910.



Fig. 0.6. Bed curtain, Coromandel Coast, India, 1680–1700; plain woven cotton with painted and mordant and resist dyed decoration. This was part of a full set of hangings from Ashburnham Place, Sussex. Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Samuel Putnam Avery Fund and Gift of Mrs. Samuel Cabot, 53.2202.

plates were found not only in the church but also throughout the homes of the Native population.³ Although we do not know the identity of the makers of the bowl or the lacquered folding chair, attention to the formal, material, and fabrication details embedded in each reveals artisans able to respond to new external ideas within their own system of production.

While these two examples of entangled objects from the early modern period highlight production far from Europe but influenced by European forms and styles, a set of bed hangings embroidered in Boston in 1714 by Mary Fifield and her daughter Mary and passed along to Mary's descendants reverses this sort of exchange (fig. 0.5). In the late seventeenth century, Indian painted cottons from the Coromandel Coast and wrought cottons from Gujarat became extremely popular for bed hangings, curtains, and wall coverings in Britain and its colonies (fig. 0.6). Such imported chintzes also served as inspirations for genteel woman, who worked imported needlework kits from England or followed patterns provided by local needlework teachers. According to family tradition, Captain Richard Fifield, a Boston merchant, sent to Britain for a full set of fustian hangings with the designs drawn on them and the necessary colored wool thread to embroider them.⁴

The Fifield hangings reveal full awareness of Indian chintz compositions, characterized by rocky, hilly scenery along the bottom, delicate flowers dispersed along various meandering vines, and internal patterning and color gradations on the leaves and petals, executed with British embroidery techniques. The scale and distribution of the flowers and the amount of open background space more closely resembles Indian designs than British embroidery of the same period, which often incorporates large-scale flowers, animals, and insects, but the Fifield women drew on a wider variety of stitching techniques to develop shading and texture. Whereas Gujarati and Bengali needleworkers relied on chain stitches exclusively, the Anglo-American embroiderers used a variety of stitches such as laid, stem, link, knot, and bullion. This distinction speaks to a different set of production values. The reliance on chain stitch in works from Gujarat and Bengal suggests the necessity of habitual rhythm and skill as the embroiders covered large expanses of cloth fairly quickly with neat consistent stitches for the external market. The greater variety of stitches in the Fifield hangings demonstrates how the affluent female embroiderer who worked her cloth in a number of different stitches possessed different motivations: to display her accomplished skills in decorative embroidery, to seek creative stimulation, and to take pleasure in the variety of stitches without worrying about efficiency. Since she did not intend to sell it, she was less concerned with the required time and disruptive rhythm as she changed stitches. The products of this refined labor celebrate the luxury of time and were often given to and preserved by family members, as a form of familial capital and female memory and thus enjoyed a rather limited circulation.5

The folding chair, footed bowl, and bed hangings are just three of many objects that document an interconnected world and highlight the need to take a more global view about the production, reception, and lives of works of art. Scholars have traditionally narrated longue durée art histories through national or ethno-cultural lenses, focusing on a specific geography with a chronological narrative that contains a beginning, an exemplary golden age, and a decline.⁶ Following this paradigm, the three examples discussed above would all be considered simply as inferior versions of European art and their makers as aspirational copyists, even though the Japanese or Awatovi artisans maintained control over the nature of their work and innovatively adapted new ideas for a broader market, while the Fifield women were the copyists who simply followed British designs inspired by South Asian textiles. The chronological narrative often leads scholars to string together the examples of a series of artistic centers to construct an evolutionary arc of art history and chart the drift of artistic performance as one moved further away from those centers. Such studies also tend to focus on specific artistic practices characteristic of that nation or culture: bronze in ancient China, marble sculpture and painted

ceramics in ancient Greece, architecture in ancient Rome, architectural arts in medieval Europe, oil painting in early modern Europe, ink painting on paper in Ming and early Qing China, and so on. The result has been a fragmented, hierarchical field that privileges certain media or styles and essentializes certain media to stand in for specific cultures. Oftentimes studies of such objects take an imperial or even racist line of interpretation that considers the conquered or defeated as inferior. As a result, broad comparative strokes have proved difficult to sustain.⁷

Part of the difficulty in such a broader approach has been a modern frame of reference: to define art as the fine arts of painting, architecture, and sculpture; to assign the highest real and intellectual value to such works of art; and to view the world through filters generated by familiarity with these particular formats. Conditioned by the values of capitalism, Western notions of artistic value are tied to concept, originality, visuality, authorial identity, and economic value rather than function, deft skill, suitability, materiality, anonymous shop production, and cultural value. If we encounter work that exists outside this sort of framework, we often dismiss it as insignificant, merely functional, lacking in imagination, or even primitive. More often this work is relegated to a museum of natural history or an anthropology museum rather than an art museum.8 Such an act of aesthetic imperialism only reinforces the superiority of the Western canon and its underlying value system. As Henry Glassie reminds us, "No matter how important easel painting is in the late West, it is uncommon in world history. It would be more just, truer to reality, to begin with textiles and ceramics."9

In this assertion Glassie pushes back against a language of distinction and hierarchy that emerged in western Europe only about five hundred years ago. The European misunderstanding of art began valuing the cerebral over the manual, the head over the body, the visual over the haptic and other senses, and the aesthetically autonomous over the socially functional. These binaries can be found clearly in the writings of Giorgio Vasari and other early art historians who celebrate the individual genius artist as distinct from the guild-bound nameless craftsperson, and in the embrace of Kantian aesthetics that separates aesthetics from function and ranks autonomous art above socially embedded craftwork. Such a narrow definition privileges the visual and denies a wider range of senses and types of engagement with works of art. This focus on so-called fine arts to the exclusion of other practices can be found in the various terms used to describe the "artistic other," step-relatives of "real art," such as "applied arts" in the mid-nineteenth century, "decorative arts" in the late nineteenth century, "industrial arts" or "handicrafts" in the early twentieth century, or "minor arts" through much of the twentieth century. But such a hierarchical taxonomy, one buttressed by academic fields,

curatorial departments, and entrenched art markets, lacks the historical specificity given to the relative value of things, ignores a deeper temporal and wider geographical perspective, and precludes a multisensoral approach to works of art in the broadest definition of the term.¹⁰

Inspired by Glassie's exhortation, this book challenges the hierarchy of genres and materials as well as the concept of singular artistic origins and centers. Objects are messy, so we need to develop a different interpretive strategy that builds a bottom-up understanding rather than projects a top-down interpretation. But we should not merely rehash the craft romanticism of John Ruskin and William Morris or the Wissenschaft formalism of Gottfried Semper. Rather, this endeavor is different because it questions both a linear chronological narrative, often a progressive or illusionary one, and the accepted notion of art as a category that favors certain modes of production such as oil painting on canvas, marble or bronze figurative sculpture, and academic public architecture, each associated with known creators and often associated with a specific location. Objects of use, wrought in clay, fiber, wood, or metal, usually made by craftspeople whose names have disappeared from the written historical record and often portable, rarely are included in such a standard account and resist neat categories. Even when metal appears in traditional scholarship, it tends to be certain precious metals like gold and silver, because of their current market value, or copper alloys used for figurative sculpture.

Skillfully made and daily-used ceramics, textiles, wooden objects, or base metal vessels rarely appear in standard art historical narratives even though they can be found throughout the world and have possessed significant exchange, relational, or situational value throughout time. It is their very circulation that contributes to their interpretive power, one that is distinct from the monumentality of fixed architecture, burial goods, and murals or wall-hung paintings. Instead, this volume consciously embraces these quotidian materials as the very embodiments of a more inclusive human history of art—one that allows for varied types of aesthetic value; multiple coexisting and often connected centers; a multidirectional flow of material ideas; a sense of dynamic hybridity, inspiration, or appropriation; and accrued meanings over generations.

Many examples of this cultural interchange occurred outside of western Europe. In the twelfth century, metalworkers in Herat, in Khorasan (present-day Afghanistan), developed a particular talent for producing wrought brass vessels inlaid with silver for merchants as well as for political and religious officials. With the Mongol invasion of the thirteenth century, many of these craftspeople fled westward to Mosul, the Jazira region of Syria, and Cairo and began to work for a diverse clientele that included local Muslims and Eastern Christians as well as Crusaders. Whereas the Herat artisans had borrowed

freely from Chinese imagery, such as mythical creatures (dragons, phoenixes, and qilins), and inserted them into hunting scenes, courtly cycles, or astrological motifs typical of Seljuk imagery, those who settled in Mosul, Syria, and Egypt often incorporated Christian themes, demonstrating an ability to respond to local demands with a fluid and selective interchanging of imagery. These metalworkers, well versed in using silver and gold inlay to provide ornamental programs that included calligraphic benedictions or dedications and that used rondels or arabesques with zodiac signs or scenes of hunting and feasting, provided local Islamic customers with pen boxes and inkwells for scribes, ewers and basins for the court, and candlesticks for the mosque and home. These designs often revealed close affinities with regional Islamic manuscript illustration but also incorporated biblical imagery acceptable to Islamic patrons.¹¹

A covered cylindrical vessel embodies the artisans' abilities to blend different decorative traditions. In this Copto-Arabic environment, Eastern Christian and Ayyubid imagery could be fluid and together comprised the basis of a common, naturalized, visual vocabulary. The body of the cylinder features panels illustrating Jesus entering Jerusalem and a series of individual saints, set within an Islamic composition of arabesques surrounded by vegetal motifs (fig. 0.7). These images were acceptable to Muslims, unlike scenes of Christ's death or divinity. The top is decorated with a single Madonna and Child image, but not the typical European version of an enthroned Virgin Mary (fig. 0.8). Instead she is depicted as a Seljuk ruler, sitting cross-legged on the ground, dressed in pants and with a bound turban on her head. This cylinder is one of numerous objects from the period that combined Christian and Islamic imagery, underscoring the interchangeable visual vocabulary in this locality. Even its owner or use is ambiguous: its elaborate decoration suggests it was commissioned and used by a local Christian or Muslim to hold aromatics, jewelry, or precious items, but it might also have been purchased by a Crusader who sought a souvenir from the region.¹² This fluid use of locally available and acceptable imagery attests to the flow of ideas through the movement of makers, technology, and objects within a shifting series of networks.

The mobility of craftspeople and their skills, the trade in materials and objects, and the opportunities for easy artisanal adaptation during a period of "low technology" endowed the preindustrial material world with a certain fluid vitality born of engagement and exchange.¹³ Objects are inherently complex assemblages of ideas, materials, and performances that traveled in various directions, often at varied speeds, from centers to peripheries, from the edge of empire back to the metropole, and between various locales in between. To capture this nonlinear sense of interchange, one that crosses arbitrary borders and possesses its own sense of temporality, I have consciously used the terms



Fig. 0.7. Pyxis depicting standing saints or ecclesiastics and the entry into Jerusalem with Christ riding a donkey, Syria or Mosul, Iraq, mid-thirteenth century; fabricated copper alloy, chased and inlaid with silver and black niello-like material (significant losses of silver sheet). The panel to the right of the hasp shows Jesus entering Jerusalem. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Rogers Fund, 1971, 1971.39a, b.

"global" and "objects" in the title of this volume. "Global," rather than "transnational" or "transcultural," defines a geohistory in which the interchange was both economic and cultural. The action of interchange, often facilitated by objects and images, was undertaken by a wide variety of agents: nation-states, religious organizations, traders either venturing to another land or entertaining visitors from distant territories, soldiers, other sorts of travelers, and indi-

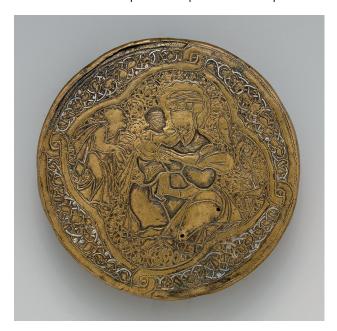


Fig. 0.8. Detail of the top of the cylindrical box in fig. 0.7. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Rogers Fund, 1971, 1971.39a, b.

viduals. The resulting networks of parallels, connections, and dead ends favor the use of the word "global," in which location has a very particular resonance and multiple locations of various sizes are connected. Moreover, the term is readily understood today.¹⁴

Throughout this book, I also use the term "object," for its neutrality, or "work of art," for its explicit reference to the work of skilled fabrication and for its inclusivity. For me, "artifact" has certain typological associations in the archaeological world, "stuff" is too colloquial, and "thing" is closely connected to literary "thing theory," which focuses on the discourse around an object. Although thing theory has a certain academic cachet at the moment, the term "thing" tends to be a modernist construction that dematerializes the object and emphasizes the representation of the void of an object or the discourse that surrounds the object. While helpful for teasing out multiple meanings and reminding us about the instability of an object, this abstraction of material culture emphasizes the visual and obscures the maker and process. Economic historians interested in gross flows of material culture also tend to use terms like "things" or "goods," thereby contributing to a frustrating vagueness about the specificity of physical evidence. My preference for "object" concretizes the links between materials, process, and people (makers and users). These objects of circulation emphasize interconnections that are geographical, social, and temporal and underscore how objects, their materials, and their making are processual, situational, and relational.15

By focusing on objects, this book offers a non-normative guide to thinking about a global art history through widely available material types. It offers neither a series of regional or national case studies nor an evolutionary timeline that charts rises and falls of certain decorative arts, but rather takes a thematic approach to interconnected histories.¹⁶ These products, and the materials from which they were made, have specific histories that are rooted in particular places but that can also cross geographies and cultures, resulting in multiple centers of production, many different loci of innovation, and a shifting variety of meanings and associations. This permeability necessitates that we shift our focus to the conception, production, and circulation of man-made objects that operate locally, regionally, and globally, often at the same time. I use the term "global" not as an all-encompassing, homogenizing macro lens but rather as a large-scale, comparative framework that is attentive to the various networks, the relationships between specific localities as well as between the local lived experience and global trends. The very nature of decentralization and exchange, and of multiple possible interpretive narratives, makes such an approach timely.¹⁷ This book is thus a distinctive and unique, if not radical, approach to thinking about a global history of art.

This interest in broader global histories of art is related to but separate from the recent "material turn" in history. Extending their reach beyond mere social and consumption history, many scholars have begun to focus on a specific material to unwrap the harvesting, fabrication, trade, and value of specific commodities such as cod, cotton, or mahogany. Art historians have demonstrated new interest in charting an object in motion, as it accrues different values or is adapted or altered in different contexts. Related to this interest in object-centered inquiry is the recent spate of books promising a history of a region or topic through analysis of a number of objects.¹⁸ The attention to a specific commodity provides rich insight into the global flow of raw materials, but it precludes a broader understanding of what other possible material options might have been available, what its relationship was to complementary or alternative materials or other products of the same region, or how the material might be used by different people for different purposes. What might be the spectrum of possibilities in a choice of material or the uses of a material? Just as artisans often exerted their own agency upon a material, so did material often dictate the limits and possibilities of the medium to the maker.¹⁹ In art history, the materials approach typically begins from the perspective of the viewer/user and then works toward a formal and associational "reading" of an object. Such an approach risks a superficial theorization of the illustration or representation of an object, in which vision is privileged over tactility and other senses and the final product is emphasized over deliberate choices taken along the way of making. This perhaps reflects an ever-increasing illiteracy

about our own relationship to materials and processes.²⁰ Materials and their properties were intertwined with artisanal knowledge and thus complicate a simple notion about the materiality of an object.

Recent exploration of the movement of objects through space and time has been productive but has not been fully explored. Most scholarly efforts have focused on a single object or tracked a single leg of the journey from one place to a second. Much of this work might be categorized as trade history, the mapping of the diffusion of certain aesthetic styles. The emphasis in this approach is often on the exterior, the appearance or iconography, rather than the interior, where the agency of the maker is expressed in the choice of materials and technologies. A related approach is the object biography, which emphasizes the provenance or social life of an object as an end onto itself, rather than exploring the social contexts of creation and circulation. Other possible ways that mobility might prove a valuable approach is to consider how paths of movement might have crossed, how an object might accrue or lose elements as it was transshipped through several points, or how nonlinear or asymmetric exchange might have affected objects and their value. In short, objects in motion were rarely stable.

Rather than chart one specific canonical narrative or offer an inclusive survey, this volume is designed to provide readers with the principles of material literacy, a guide of sorts to systematic and sustained analysis, so that they might recognize and interpret the raw materials, commercial exchanges, technological adaptations, directional flow, cultural flux, and reception of the material world. Such an approach thinks with and through materials and techniques to understand function, desire, and meaning. Objects are not simply reflections of values but are complex entities that defy easy categorization. They perform as active, symbolic agents that emerge in specific contexts yet might change in form, use, or value over time. Human activity creates material culture, which in turn makes action possible while also recursively shaping and controlling action.²¹

This volume focuses mainly on a period in world history characterized by an overlapping of long-distance trade, regional exchange, and local production, beginning primarily with the Central Asian and Indian Ocean routes that existed as early as the second century BCE, extending up through the Atlantic and Pacific trade from the sixteenth through the eighteenth centuries, and concluding basically in the nineteenth century, as improvements in production and transportation, the rise of industrial capitalism, and development of synthetics reordered the material world and alienated many people from the making of objects.²² The temporal range is further determined by the rate of survival, the result of both the inherent properties of the materials and trends in production. Older objects have not survived in great numbers:

wood decays or burns; base metals are often melted down and repurposed, either as new objects or as military materiel; textiles rip, are altered or become scraps to be used in making something new, or are consumed by insects; and ceramics break and are discarded. Archaeological work and manuscripts help offset some of this bias. But this time period is exactly the moment when production of objects increases, first through intensification and improvement of processes and then through movement of materials, thereby contributing to the survival of a greater number of examples.²³

I have also relied on scholars who have published in English even though their fieldwork is based on intense local study and command of languages. Looking at objects from so many geographies and cultures precluded sufficient command of so many native languages. Similarly, I had to make decisions about which objects to illustrate. Many are part of prominent, internationally recognized museum collections; this facilitated the acquisition of good photography. While the time period and origins of objects contained in this volume are not totally comprehensive, its methodology can and should be applied to objects from many places and periods.

Through a process of object-driven inquiry—one that begins with the object and works outward rather than object-centered confirmation that begins with set ideas and then narrows down to look at a single work—the goal of this book is a more global and complex view of culture from varied regions and over a long period of time in which inception, emulation, adaptation, innovation, and appropriation flow in various directions. It is an opportunity to step away from a strict diffusionist paradigm in which less talented makers at the periphery slavishly copy or bizarrely misinterpret the "correct" styles of the metropole and to take into account multiple motivations for and techniques used in artisanal interaction. This book is structured in three parts that follow the life of the object, from creation to purchase and use, and finally, to experienced meaning. The first section emphasizes the importance of materials and techniques, which in turn aids in understanding affordances—that is, a full accounting of the properties of different materials and processes relating to an object that make clear how it should be used. The second section analyzes the movement of objects through the examination of consumption, mobility, and initial use, while the third explores the ongoing social life of objects through a consideration of material meanings that accrue after that first transaction. What should go without saying is that, foundational to this approach, the world of the past three thousand years has always been interconnected in some fashion, and the global perspective on transcultural art is not a recent phenomenon but one with a long history of regional expertise, exchange, and consumer desire.

The first section consists of two chapters. Chapter 1 addresses the importance of materials to the study of an object. Materials such as earthenware clays, conifers, and wool are relatively ubiquitous, while others such as Chinese porcelain, Caribbean mahogany, and South Asian cottons have very specific geographies that lead to long-distance demand based on rarity, novelty, or desirability. Certain materials often possess specific ties to the local habitat and economy (woven raffia in Africa or zinc alloy bidriware in the Deccan region of India), resulting in cumulative tacit knowledge over generations that contributes to a local expertise. In some locations people also conceive of raw materials not simply as natural resources but as living entities, the use of which requires permission from ruling spirits or the materials themselves. A broad consideration of raw ingredients permits an understanding of specific properties that lend themselves to certain technologies or uses and results in a topographical sense of materiality. There are often geographic explanations for suitability, rarity, and desire.²⁴

The next chapter focuses on realization: how makers transform these materials into objecthood. Understanding the range of possibilities is key to unlocking the structural logic and underlying grammar of a work of art on its own terms, as well as systems of production. The awareness of possibilities and appropriateness corrects a tendency to be judgmental in the assessment of objects, to project one's own view or prejudices on it and to place it in some sort of progressive chain. Instead, it is crucial for analysis to begin inside an object and move outward. An understanding of the range of materials and technologies available to the maker, and what the choice of material or level of workmanship means within specific contexts of labor or social use, will enable scholars to make more accurate cross-cultural observations and better understand the exchange of ideas and things.

Building on this fuller understanding of materials and processes, the second section consists of another two chapters. Chapter 3 explores how objects lived in the world once they left the shop, initially as commodities for sale, trade, and exchange. While they were the products of specific organizational structures, these items often served local functional needs as well as exchange value, but many also found wider markets owing to regional specialization and production efficiency, trade routes, or the production of specific highend objects. Works of art circulated not only in fully finished form but also more conceptually or partially, through the movement of makers, the exchange of technology, and the sharing of imagery found on prints, textiles, or decorated surfaces.

Such objects could satisfy a variety of functional needs, from basic ergonomic function to social distinction or ritualistic practice. A fourth chapter

explores how they could establish or reinforce social distinction through materials, size, workmanship, or style. Many specialized forms also supported identity-affirming leisurely rituals such as card playing, smoking, or drinking fermented beverages.²⁵ In addition to use and social value, other objects possessed metaphorical value. This chapter thus also examines the practice of collecting and displaying certain trade objects that support racial difference and showcase prestige or power. Whether promoted by the state or by the initiative of individuals picking up souvenirs from travel, much of this collecting impulse is tied to the colonial imperialism that emerges from these networks of trade. Acknowledgment of trade and function not only reveals the flow of ideas and desires over time but also helps sharpen the interpretive eye deployed in the third section.²⁶

Once objects have been set in motion, the third section addresses how these works of art then enter into different contexts, develop different meanings, or serve an active role in the construction of new attitudes apart from their original context. Chapter 5 engages with the themes of memory and gifting. Objects are often presented or transferred to another person, with a series of artifactual or social reciprocal obligations implied. These objects are then subject to continued social maintenance: they might get repurposed or reworked based on an outdated function or changing cultural value, accretions to an object might alter its function or meaning, and some objects might be recycled.²⁷ A sixth chapter looks at the role of appearance in the construction of meaning. Objects could seduce users and viewers in a number of ways: large or small size, elaborate ornamental program, wondrous or unnatural surfaces, or the ingenuity of skilled workmanship. For example, artisans sought to create shiny, lustrous finishes to make objects wondrous and unnatural: lacquer, glaze, and planishing all contributed to glossy objects in which the outer skin reflected light, made objects seem to float, and concealed the labor underneath. Makers also manipulated surfaces to suggest alternative narratives: deliberately rubbed-through lacquered wooden objects suggested a history for new work, while certain industrially produced metalwares during the arts and crafts movement featured deliberate hammer marks to evoke an earlier era of explicit handwork. Linking the history of visuality to material exploration and artisanal performance is central to this chapter.28

The chapter on appearance, and its focus on vision, leads logically to the next one, which emphasizes the importance of touch and the haptic engagement with objects. While visual engagement is important, the embodied experience is equally if not more important in terms of value or meaning. Many of these objects evolved to answer human needs, and bodily interaction was key to their successful function or perceived use. A multisensory approach makes

it possible to move on to more abstract ideas about constructing identity or navigating between different cultures.²⁹

It has been common to rely on terms such as "encounter" or "exploitation" in charting such interconnected contact, but perhaps we need to rethink what exchange or hybridity really means for all sides. There is politics both in making and in the made object. It is essential to pay attention to all participants in the creative and social life of an object: producer, transporter, consumer, user, and collector. Can adaptation, initiative, innovation, or appropriation flow in various directions at once? Throughout this kind of analysis and interpretation it is essential to keep in mind the relationship between surface and substrate, exterior and interior, front and back, public and private, original intent and later use. Objects can tell us a great deal about the creative impulses and lived experiences of different times. The ultimate goal of this sort of object-driven inquiry is a material literacy informed by cultural curiosity rather than a desire to judge, classify, and rank and by an awareness and appreciation of varied approaches to problem solving rather than an assumption there is only a best way identified in hindsight.

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