

Gender and material culture: Review Article

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Daly Goggin, Maureen and Fowkes Tobin, Beth (eds), *Women and Things, 1750-1950*, Ashgate 2009, ISBN: 978-0-7546-6550-2, hardback, £70.00, 373pp

Daly Goggin, Maureen and Fowkes Tobin, Beth (eds), *Women and the Material Culture of Needlework and Textiles, 1750-1950*, Ashgate, 2009, ISBN: 978-0-7546-6538-0, hardback £70.00, 296pp

Daly Goggin, Maureen and Fowkes Tobin, Beth (eds), *Material Women, 1750-1950*, Ashgate, 2009, ISBN: 978-0-7546-6539-7, hardback, £75.00, 384pp

Gender studies and feminist theory were introduced to museum studies in the mid 1980s, focusing mainly on the role of women as heritage actors and/or as heritage contributors. It has been argued that museums are a gendered space where women's production and history are under-represented and over-simplified, and where stereotypical notions of masculinity and femininity have been naturalized and perpetuated (see Levin 2010). As a result, gender representations in exhibitions, along with equal opportunity employment and inclusive policy-making, have been the main areas of research (Schwartz 2007). It is only recently that there seems to be a shift of emphasis; although representation issues and policy-making issues retain their importance, there is a growing interest in the role of feminist theory as an innovative force in museums that will change current curatorial practices and will provide new energy and life to institutions. In other words, feminist theory has been suggested as an analytical tool that will help museum theorists and practitioners alike to reconsider the role of museums as agents of social change (Hein 2007).

The trilogy edited by Maureen Daly Goggin and Beth Fowkes Tobin is a significant contribution to the discussion. Although they are not dealing directly with museums, the three volumes consist of forty-seven articles written by scholars from diverse disciplines (among them museum curators and museum academics), which collectively aim to change the 'poetics of knowledge' (Ranci re 1994) of material culture and to introduce to the discussion of the material world notions deriving from gender historiography as this has been shaped during the last decade or so. Gender history, far from being a homogeneous field, forms a critique, a de-constructive approach to the traditional historical perspective. It favours history as a highly subjective enterprise, invites attention to the (gendered) subjectivity of the historian, and aims to (re)-conceptualize the archive as a process and not as an end product. It considers gender – in this case 'women' – as a historically variable category, women as historical agents, and allows the histories of science, sexuality and the body to challenge pre-determined perceptions of the past and to question positivism (Hantzaroula 2011).

Along these lines, the explicit aim of this trilogy is to argue that women's role in society and art has to be re-evaluated and appreciated as constructive and socially important as well as to challenge the ideology of domesticity which emerged during the 200-year period, i.e. 1750-1950, that the trilogy covers. The essays in all three books discuss women as highly skilled creators and producers of decorative as well as useful objects, and as responsible – as opposed to frivolous – consumers, who participated in the social labour involved in consuming and were thus actively engaged in the creation, safeguarding and transformation of social relations. In other words, they put female identity at the centre of historical discourse and construct a theory of culture with women as politically and socially active subjects. Women, who in the past have

been dealt with as 'objectified subjects', are brought to the forefront as active creators of history instead of passive recipients of it.

Emphasis in all three volumes is placed on what are considered to be 'traditional' female enterprises, that is, decorative arts and home crafts. However, instead of dealing with them as products of particular gendered practices, the essays interpret needlework and textiles as epistemic activities, categories of analysis and meaning making.

The volume entitled *Women and Things* focuses on what is called 'gendered material practices' (pp. 1-2). The emphasis is shifted from the object, which has been traditionally reified in material culture studies (see, for instance, Tilley *et al.* 2006), to the ways that objects are conceptualized, produced, circulated, used and exchanged. Drawing on Bruno Latour's remarks regarding the complex relationship between subject and object, the interaction between 'the women subjects' and (women's) objects is brought to the forefront. The essays of this volume provide concrete examples of women's material practices and therefore encourage the reader to re-consider notions of women's productivity, creativity, ingenuity, as well as their intellectual, social and artistic contributions. The book is organized in four sections: the first one, entitled 'Textiles and meaning making' (chapters by M. Dally Goggin, V. Richmond, L. Peers and M.A. Smetzer) explores the ways in which women's sewing can be used/understood as a representation and a reproduction of gender, class and racial identities. The association between rhetoric and material culture that goes beyond the reading of the end product as a text, to the recognition of the process of material culture transformation as an identity statement, is highly interesting and needs to be taken further in other publications. The second section employs the term 'bricolage' (a loan from Claude Levi-Strauss) as its title and connecting thread (with chapters by A. Fennetaux, J. Sedda, A. Kolasinski Marcinkus, A. Mecklenburg-Faenger). Bricolage is understood as 'a process through which women expressed themselves as individuals, but most importantly, organized, appropriated and made sense of the world around them' (Fennetaux, p. 92). The essays in this section focus on how women used available objects (such as shells and dried botanicals) to create new meanings and practices, thus transforming the process of making something into a powerful inventive strategy. The third part, 'Troubling the private/public divide' (chapters by C. Nixon and L. Penner, M. Sterckx, R. Bedell and M. Samu, L.G. Gurjeva and M. Eichmans Cochran), questions the binary opposition between public and private spaces and claims that women re-defined not only the private (as is usually considered) but also the public sphere through their material practices. By highlighting the role and work of female sculptors, Sterckx describes a transition between the private and the public attempted by women artists who tried to make their mark in (semi) public spaces; on the other hand, Bedell and Samu delve into the work of the American sculptress Caroline Shaw Brooks who tried to achieve a combination of art, domestic activity and a dairy product, since her working material was ... butter. Interestingly enough, in the women's engagement with the material world, not only are the apparent practices of production (when a woman actually *makes* something, be it a doll, a collage, a cake or a butter sculpture) included, but also activities such as the writing of a letter where the making process is less visible and more implicit (Nixon and Penner, p. 157). The last group, 'Memory and commemoration' (chapters by K. Rieder, L. Reid Ricker, M. Coughlin, J. Wingate, A. Kearney) analyses both mundane and monumental memorial practices, from personal autograph albums (Reid Ricker), to public monuments for World War I (Wingate) and ceremonial spaces (Kearney), in order to explore women's role as active keepers of memory, both at a personal/family micro-level and at a social/community macro-level. In more than one part of this book, the notion of the archive is contested and enriched. Kearney, in particular, applies the notion of 'constructedness' in definitions of material culture and thus allows for an enhancement of the term to include both tangible and intangible elements of human culture. Shifting the emphasis from materiality to process makes possible a discussion of all range of cultural constructions as powerful things, able to maintain culture and cultural identity (p. 333).

The volume entitled *Women and the Material Culture of Needlework and Textiles* continues, in a sense, the argument first stated in the previous volume, but within a stricter frame. By discussing women and the material strategies associated with the 'traditionally' feminine crafts, these essays shed light on the extraordinary impact of such practices in the social, political, economic, ethnic and cultural domains, while their assembly in a volume aims

to cover a long-standing void in academic research. The study of 'women's crafts' has been neglected in terms of theoretical academic work; this volume, therefore, aims to begin theorizing the complex, dynamic relationship among women, gender, culture, politics and needlework in order to deconstruct uncritical feminized assumptions regarding women and their needles. At the same time, it reconsiders women's participation in epistemic constructions and deconstructs another binary, that of art/craft, which has been a stubbornly present, patriarchal construction of the last 200 years at least.

The book is organized in three sections: the first, entitled 'Identity, embroidery and sewing' explores the ways in which needlework is constructed by and constructs gender identity (chapters by H. Pristash and I. Schaechterle and S. Carter Wood, M. Daly Goggin, A.E. Newell, M. McLean). The first two essays of this section offer a convincing argument for reading both the praxis and the artefact of needlework as a form of epideictic rhetoric and an alternative site of discourse. The second section, 'Cultural identity, piecing, quilting and lacemaking' examines the ways quilts and laces reflect the complex relations between women and their world. 'Situated knowledge' and 'embodied knowledge' are used as key concepts in order to de-stabilize abstract thinking and to explore the ways in which practices and the material object of this praxis (i.e. the products) embody in the process their makers and their context of production (chapters by B. Gordon and L. Horton, C. Culver Prescott, M. MacDowell, E. Fernandez-Sacco, I. Campagnol). Gordon and Horton argue that quilts represent family archives, embodying the memories and relationships among the women involved. Therefore, quilts are objects that embody social relationships. Culver Prescott argues that quilt making, and home labour in general, reflect gender roles as well as social and economic changes, whereas MacDowell argues that Native quilting is an artistic legacy supporting belief systems as much as any other art. Campagnol discusses lace making as practiced in Venetian monasteries and its role as a tool of self-affirmation. The last section, 'Politics and design in yarn and thread', focuses on the politics of cloth and needlework design and production and thus calls attention to shifting meanings around domesticity and professional spaces (chapters by L.A. Smith, S. Johnson, C. Fowler, S.M. Strawn). In Smith's article, a nineteenth century novel provides the backdrop for an interrogation of the conditions in which female workers were employed in textile mills in mid-nineteenth century New England. Johnson highlights the significant contributions of women to nineteenth century industrial design and claims that their impact has been so important and lasting that it deserves scholarly attention equal to that offered to other issues of industrial history. Finally, knitting as a political statement is discussed in the essay by Strawn.

This volume, apart from being a collection of case-studies, is also evocative of a multiplicity of methodological tools and strategies, which are available to historians who wish to broaden their perspectives and understanding of needlework and textiles under a feminist light. Furthermore, it is the volume to which museum curators willing to re-interpret objects in their institutions' collections along a different line of thought, have contributed the most.

The third book of the series, entitled *Material Women*, uses consumption as a key notion of analysis. Understanding consumption as a social practice that intersects with identity formation is not a new idea. Since the 1990s, anthropology has encouraged rethinking consumption not in terms of economics but in terms of material culture. The work of Appadurai, for instance, which highlights the fact that objects *do* have social lives, are shaped by specific contexts and their meanings are derived from human interactions, has been particularly useful in the study of collections and collectors. The gendered nature of collections, though, has been little discussed. Whilst women collectors have been included in monographs about 'great personalities', in an attempt to redress the imbalance between women and 'great men collectors' (see Cabanne 2003; Gere & Vaizey 1999), these discussions have tended to be celebratory without following a sound theoretical perspective, either in terms of cultural historiography or of gender. In their discussion of 'engendering collections', Pearce (1995) and Belk & Wallendorf (1997) focused on the stereotypes about women as collectors; for instance, that they usually collect house objects and decorative art, favour collections that support or relate to their sexual agenda, their collections are usually considered less important in pure artistic terms than those of men, and find their way into museums much less often. It is only recently that a more complex approach to collections made by females has been attempted and there is still a long way to go in this respect (see Macleod 2008, Black 2009, Matthews 2009,

Rovers 2009, Bounia 2011, etc.).

On the other hand, women's consumption has been studied, often in association with their collecting habits, as a frivolous and non-productive activity. This set of essays aims to address both these shortcomings by posing the question of how consumption (including collecting) constructs subjectivity.

Material Women is divided into four sections. The first one, 'Consuming desires' (chapters by P. Siska, R.E. Iskin, A. Adolph) introduces the argument by questioning how consumption has constructed subjectivity and contributed to identity formation and self-expression in particular case-studies: Siska focuses on Mary Shelley and her desire for English-made objects that helped her define herself as an English woman living abroad. Iskin analyses French advertising posters for department stores and the use of material culture to affirm class, while Adolph studies the impact of wartime rationing on women, as described in two novels. The second part, entitled 'Home and consumption' (chapters by E.C. Macknight, C. Patterson, R. Pulju, E. Bills), consists of essays that discuss the female space *par excellence*. Following the lead provided by Iskin in the previous section, Macknight and Patterson in their respective essays demonstrate how important taste was in affirming class affiliation. Pulju's essay on French women's fantasies about American kitchen appliances in the post-World War II period connects consumption and the home to political issues; similarly, Bills demonstrates how an American telephone company managed to convey through their advertisements ideas about modernity and therefore express political views. The third section (chapters by E. Kennedy Johnson, A. Beaujot, A.D. Jhala, W. Ling, D. Konate) juxtaposes case studies from different national regions and historical eras in order to reveal similarities in the use of material culture as a means of identity creation and social practice. As its title, 'Dress: gendered and political identities' suggests, this section focuses on how clothing and jewellery display class and rank as well as signal national and political identity and political allegiances. Jhala's essay, for example, discusses the role of women as curators of objects that display family status and national heritage while performing personal identities in India; Konaté's article on Senegalese fashion reveals how the consumption of a certain type of dress, *robe bloc*, helped women to perform and display their identities as participants in the political process. Similarly, Ling claims that the use of *qipao* (a dress combining western and Chinese characteristics) was a way of constructing complex cosmopolitan identities for the women of China. The last section, under the title 'Collecting, displaying and creating value' (chapters by B. Fowkes Tobin, P. Corpron Parker, S.J. Brown, J.T. Criss, B. Lambrum) explores collecting as a complex (gendered) consumption practice across national boundaries and time periods. From the British tradition of the Duchess of Portland (Fowkes Tobin), one of the most important shell collectors of her era, to collecting as an induction into the (male) educated elite for female Chinese collectors (Brown), the contributors suggest that collecting as a social practice enabled complex identifications and participation of women in the elite scientific, literary and artistic spheres of their societies. Although class would have also been an interesting category of analysis here, these essays focus on gender and provide interesting insights into the world of 'feminine' collecting. Finally, the articles by Criss and Labrum (but also by Iskin and Macknight in the previous sections) discuss display, collecting and consumption and argue that display techniques involving furniture and architecture travelled across spaces from the department store to the parlour and the museum and back, confirming that the production of value is intertwined with consumption and commerce. Whether we agree with this conclusion or not, there is no doubt that the essays provide a compelling argument for it, as well as being most explicitly related to the museum world.

As in all collections of essays, some essays are stronger and more convincing; nevertheless, in my view, the most important contribution that these three books make to the museological field is the theoretical perspective that they introduce so firmly. The 'poetics of knowledge' (the set of rules according to which knowledge is constructed), that is suggested in these volumes, takes into account gender as an analytical category and 'women' as 'epistemic' agents. The (gendered) subjectivity of the historian is also explored as a result of the recognition that history and memory are shaped by individual subjectivity, inasmuch as individual subjectivity is shaped by collective aspects of history and memory. The authors of the essays in the three volumes are all women; they write (mostly) about anonymous women instead of eponymous

ones, and they often use as case studies objects that belong to their private collections (e.g. Reid Ricker) or that used to belong to their families (Gurjeva and Eichmans Cochran). Their subjectivity is thus used convincingly to illuminate (collective) experiences and identities that have, so far, been excluded from the historical/cultural narrative.

Banner (1994) has suggested that feministic scholarship has moved through a three-stage process: first, documentation of discrimination and liberation; second, identification and investigation of female traditions and cultures; third, inclusion through an emphasis on the theoretical basis of gender. I believe that this trilogy, while firmly rooted in the second stage, introduces a new way of dealing with the female past but also points to theoretical concerns regarding gender and material culture that will be of central interest to museums in the near future.

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