

# Reviews in History

Published on *Reviews in History* (<http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews>)

---

## Early Modern Things: Objects and their Histories, 1500-1800

**Review Number:**

1512

**Publish date:**

Thursday, 21 November, 2013

**Editor:**

Paula Findlen

**ISBN:**

9780415520515

**Date of Publication:**

2012

**Price:**

£100.00

**Pages:**

389pp.

**Publisher:**

Routledge

**Publisher url:**

<http://www.routledge.com/books/details/9780415520515/>

**Place of Publication:**

London

**Reviewer:**

Victoria Jackson

The meaning of an object, Paula Findlen tells us, is in perpetual change. Why an object is valued and how it might be perceived or represented by its users and viewers can be dramatically different at each moment in an object's life. One example that Findlen uses in her introduction is the 'Akan Drum', which featured in the BBC Radio 4/British Museum joint project 'A History of the World in 100 Objects'. The drum originated in the Ghana region of West Africa in the early 18th century, but was later found in the English Colony of Virginia by Hans Sloane, the founder of the British Museum. While in Ghana, the drum would have been played during religious ceremonies, but it is believed to have traveled across the Atlantic on a slave ship, where drumming was a frequent accompaniment to the enforced dancing of African captives. It was acquired by the British Museum around 1750, where it is currently sits on display, and is now thought to be one of the oldest African-American objects to survive. The drum evokes a history of Ghanaian ceremony and religious ritual, the capture, enslavement and trafficking of humans, the suppression of African music in the British colonies, the collision of African and English culture created by the slave trade as well as Hans Sloane's curiosity about slavery and its associated artefacts. As Findlen says, the drum makes the history of these moments 'tangible and concrete' (p. 6). Through this example and many more, Findlen and the other contributors reveal the multiple lives of objects and how a singular thing like a wooden drum can bear

witness to a 'wide range of human experience' (pp. 5-6).

*Early Modern Things: Objects and their Histories, 1500-1800* is a collection of 17 essays edited by Findlen, which explores what we can learn about the early modern world by studying its things and their meanings and how these change over time, from culture to culture and across geographic locations. The geography of objects is a central theme to the collection as a whole which, without trying to be comprehensive, covers everything from still-life paintings from the Dutch Golden Age to clothing of the Ottoman Empire, artisanal inventories from 17th-century Florence to artefacts collected by the Shogun in Tokugawa Japan, furniture from Georgian England to ginseng in Ming China. The temporally and culturally diverse set of examples is employed to illustrate that the 'history of material culture is one of the most productive areas in which to develop intersecting narratives of the past, some of them local and comparative, others cross-cultural, transnational, and global' (p. 6). By juxtaposing these case studies, the volume encourages the reader to look beyond the confines of their own subject matter and consider the value that cross-cultural comparisons of material culture may have. Findlen is especially successful in this endeavor in her introduction, because by looking to all these vastly different geographic areas, she identifies global patterns of early modern consumption, circulation, and use. The world of early modern goods is firmly established as an essential element in the study of global history.

The book offers a rich and diverse set of approaches for studying the production, circulation and consumption of early modern things. Findlen is clear that it is not intended to be a methodological handbook for the study of material culture, but rather 'a historical sampler of what we can learn by writing the history of objects as well as histories from objects' (p. 6). Readers are presented with cultural, economic and social perspectives with particular insights from the history of trade and exchange, science and technology, and medicine. As would be expected in a volume of this nature, the use of sources is exceptionally wide-ranging. In her chapter on how birds were conceptualized in relation to humans during the Spanish expansion into the Americas, Marcy Norton relies on English and Spanish falconry treatises, husbandry manuals, travel narratives and early modern visual representations of Native Americans and the Tupi people of Brazil shown with parrots. Anne McCants uses over 900 probate inventories compiled by the regents of the Amsterdam Municipal Orphanage between 1740 and 1782 in order to document goods associated with tea and coffee consumption. Giorgio Riello also discusses probate inventories, but examines their use as a source for studying the past, and specifically the history of consumption. He draws the reader's attention to the nature of the inventory as a historical source 'a static document that is 'influenced by social and legal conventions and by the specific economic and financial values attributed to artifacts and commodities in the early modern period' (p. 127). The objects represented in inventories, however, changed physically over time, and consequently their meaning and value changed to the people who inherited or acquired them. The array of sources used throughout the chapters is assembled to construct an image of the active role objects played in the experience of daily life. Visual representations (paintings, drawings and engravings) show us what things looked like; artisanal how-to manuals enable us to follow historical technical processes and reconstruct early modern objects; account books can elucidate how things were acquired, exchanged, gifted and perceived and travel journals reveal why certain cultures developed strong emotional ties to some things and yet were impassive to others. It is because of this rich and generous set of sources and approaches that Findlen succeeds in one of her 'primary goals' for the volume, being 'to invite readers to think about the insights gleaned from different methodologies and kinds of sources' (p. 13). Future studies of early modern material culture or global early modernity, whatever their methodology or approach may be, will undoubtedly be indebted to this work.

The chapters are organized into six parts: 'The ambiguity of things'; 'Representing things'; 'Making things'; 'Empires of things'; 'Consuming things'; and an epilogue, 'The power of things'. Chapters which focus on objects that have received considerable attention in the past 'such as Dutch still-life paintings or things associated with the consumption of coffee and drinking chocolate' are presented next to those which have received little to none scholarly attention, like New World birds, Russian rhubarb and Anatolian timber. These pairings demonstrate clear connections between cultures but they also express 'the cultural hybridity of many things engendered at this particular moment' (p. 5). At times, the sheer amount of

material is overwhelming and it becomes difficult to grasp all of the places, time periods and things. But each author continually relates their approach to the larger picture, making each chapter and the book as a whole clear and accessible. And the concluding epilogue effectively summarizes and clarifies what the chapters tell us collectively about the material culture of the expanding early modern world.

Following on from Findlen's introduction, part one, 'The ambiguity of things?', consists of essays which look at the instability of objects. Carla Nappi shows how in early modern China, ginseng was not considered an individual or coherent thing. It was a number of different plant species which were identified and described in distinct ways, depending on the locality of the root and modes of observation. This makes writing a biography of the object particularly difficult. As Nappi says 'Even if there is a stable material entity that persists over time, its meaning, identity and thing-ness change, sometimes dramatically, in different (historical, geographic, epistemic) contexts' (p. 33). Jessica Riskin shows that in early modern natural science, clocks were a frequently used metaphor for systems such as the cosmos and living animal and human bodies, but they did not necessarily connote regularity or precision. Clockwork machines were compared with human bodies because they were both perceived to experience disquiet or restlessness and were thought to be in states of 'perpetual flux' (p. 97). Thus, the meaning of 'clockwork' changed over time and if readers today are to understand the meaning of these metaphors, we must 'suspend any preconceptions regarding the figurative meaning of 'clockwork' and 'machinery' (p. 84).

The chapters that make up part two, 'Representing things?', are concerned with the way things are represented, either visually or through written documentation, and how representation changes. Julie Hochstrasser presents an engaging discussion on the depiction of objects in Dutch 17th-century still-life paintings. As the viewer of still-lives, we become aware that we are looking at represented things from the painter's point of view through the use of materials and skills. Hochstrasser argues that while these representations indicate a new self-awareness about the materiality of the early modern world, when we are confronted with a still-life, it also prompts *our* own self-consciousness as 21st-century viewers. Riello sees household inventories as 'subjective representations' (which he likens to paintings or pictures) of the domestic of which we need to be mindful of the circumstances in which they took shape. When historians are aware of the strategies and representational intentions of the people who compiled inventories, then, as Riello demonstrates, these documents can yield insights into how people of the past thought about things and 'dealt with an increasingly complex material world' (p. 144). Chandra Mukerji examines representations of Ottoman culture in Renaissance Europe. Through the popularity of a 16th-century French travel book with extensive illustrations of Ottoman people dressed in local costume, European readers encountered the Ottoman people and culture. Mukerji demonstrates that it was through clothing that Ottoman and European cultures were brought closer together.

In 'Making things?', Pamela Smith reconstructs metal casting techniques by following instructions in a 16th-century French manuscript on metalworking. She gives a strong sense of the difficulties experienced in translating technical practices into writing. But she also shows that the act of writing and describing one's series of actions was a creative endeavor in itself. In his chapter, Corey Tazzara examines the inventories and journals of 17th-century Florentine artisans (for example, glassmakers, shoemakers and leather gilders) to trace how they transformed raw materials into finished goods.

In 'Empires of things', Erika Monahan discusses the processes by which different kinds of rhubarb became a unified commodity that was popular Europe-wide in the 17th century. She traces rhubarb's transformation from existing in relative obscurity to becoming a valuable medicinal root and then food item and notes a certain 'rhubarb enthusiasm' which abounded all over the early modern world. Alan Mikhail tracks the path of a group of timbers from the forests of Anatolia which, after they were harvested, were fashioned into the hulls of three ships in Suez in the first half of the 18th century. The ships eventually sailed across the Red Sea carrying grain to what is today Saudi Arabia. Mikhail's chapter eloquently demonstrates the agency of timber and grain and how their movement shaped the history of the Ottoman Empire. Commenting on Mikhail's chapter, Renata Ago summarizes that 'no artifacts were more infinitely useful as mediators in the relationships between the center and the periphery of an empire than timber and grain in the Ottoman Empire' (p. 366).

The section 'Consuming things' explores how objects communicated and fashioned the identities of the people who owned and used them. Amanda Vickery looks at the creation and marketing of furniture in Georgian England, where 'the solid and the dainty emerged as design expressions of masculinity and femininity' (p. 355). Vickery convincingly argues that one way consumers shaped their gender identity was through ownership of furniture. This chapter sits particularly well beside Morgan Pitelka's chapter on three objects from the Tokugawa storehouse – an arquebus, a sword and a blue and white tea bowl. While the arquebus and sword are objects associated with war, Pitelka informs us that the tea ceremony was a crucial component of masculine civility for Japanese men. Tea, and its associated objects, could be used as a political tool: men traded tea objects to strengthen political relationships and Ieyasu, the first shogun of Tokugawa Japan, used a 16th-century tea bowl named 'Araki' after its previous owner to legitimate himself as the new shogun. Reflecting on how objects could fashion identities in Georgian England and Tokugawa Japan, gives the reader a sense of the benefits to be gleaned from the cross-cultural comparisons Findlen calls for in the introduction.

The final section 'The power of things', connects the various strands of history woven throughout the chapters and draws the reader's attention to the larger themes which underpin the volume as a whole. Renata Ago illustrates how each chapter responds to objects as things in flux, acting like fluids which are always shifting and changing. Ago argues that things 'are solids and yet behave like fluids, taking a shape that is imposed from the outside' (p. 364). This emerges, for example, in Vickery's discussion of Georgian furniture – the transformation of wood into a lady's dressing table or cabinet could make physical and visible the gender of its owner. Similarly, a series of plants identified as different from one another becomes a coherent, unified commodity like Chinese ginseng or rhubarb. In her chapter, Erin Lichtenstein discusses the fundamental connections between things and identities throughout the early modern world. Returning to the overarching theme of the book, she illustrates how 'the same object can hold could hold vastly different connotations in contrasting cultural contexts' (p. 379). For example, while the shogun's use of the tea bowl legitimated his political power, and defined his masculine identity, tea and other hot beverages in early modern Europe were closely associated with feminine sociability and domesticity.

I have touched on only some of the chapters in this volume, but enough to underscore that for students and scholars interested in a multi-disciplinary approach to the early modern world of material culture, the book will serve as a valuable reference work. As the study of global history develops, it has become increasingly important to discuss how things expressed new relationships and interactions between people as people become more interconnected. I for one am curious about what this might mean for studies of materiality. How do the sensory dimensions of early modern things affect the way they were experienced or used across cultures and at different times? Do people engage with the materials that constitute an object differently if that object has been part of a long-distance trading venture or ended up in an overseas colony, like the 'Akan Drum'? And what implications does this have for early modern studies more generally? I would suggest this book to anyone interested in the dynamic role objects played in the globalization of the early modern world.

**Links:**

[1] <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/item/69370>