

What the Object Knew: Material History Studies in Canada

Anne Gorman Condon

Volume 13, numéro 2, spring 1984

URI : https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/acad13_2rv04

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

The Department of History of the University of New Brunswick

ISSN

0044-5851 (imprimé)

1712-7432 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce document

Condon, A. G. (1984). What the Object Knew:: Material History Studies in Canada. *Acadiensis*, 13(2), 136–146.

Guardian was noting that "we know the quantity of cloth we have and we know that even that is liable to shrinkage". Many questions remain to be answered before a full history of our urban civilization is written, and we have yet to learn which urban experiences will be the most usable in the future.

PETER E. RIDER

What the Object Knew: Material History Studies in Canada

The scene is Acadia in 1750. Lack of indigenous furniture or pottery points to a people unable to supply themselves with the most rudimentary means of coping with the rigorous climate and topography. French imports inadequately fill this gap.

*

The scene is Saint John in 1800. A few cabinet makers produce stylized furniture for the military and mercantile elite. Most of the refugee population lives at a subsistence level of poverty and deprivation, making their own simple homes and furnishings, unable to support specialized craftsmen. The Loyalist presumption that "Britain is better" retards craft development.

*

The scene is Halifax in 1850. Railroads and steamships popularize furniture styles from as far away as Cincinnati. Quantity and range increase, but regional distinctions and characteristics succumb to standardized taste and mass production. The Maritime Provinces have yet to develop a tradition of truly opulent, truly elegant furnishings.

THESE DESCRIPTIONS are drawn from Donald Blake Webster's "Furniture and the Atlantic Canada Condition" in the *Material History Bulletin*, No. 15 (Summer 1982). Webster's deft overview uses household furnishings to document the transition in the Atlantic region from the crude life of the Acadian peasantry through the more adequate but still marginal Loyalist experience to the threshold of abundance via mass production. Man-made objects are Webster's research base, and he explores their fabrication and their style in order to record the rapid cultural evolution of these young British colonies.

This is the promise of material history. By focusing on human artifacts in their historical circumstances, it can connect our modern perceptions to the physical reality of a past culture. This can enable us to sense how previous generations coped with their everyday world through the fabrication of houses, tools,

churches, clothes, and all the myriad instruments of production and consumption which human beings need to control and enjoy their environment.

The proposition that one can understand the human past better by studying the range of objects produced by a particular society would seem, on the face of it, to be so self-evident as to require no comment. Yet the use of material evidence has been conspicuously absent from the bulk of historical scholarship until very recently. In part this omission arose from professional definitions of the 19th century, in which history scholars pursued a "scientific" German model based on exhaustive research in the literary remains of the past. Material evidence of the past became by default the preserve of romantic nationalists and art connoisseurs who housed their collections in museums and other nonacademic institutions. Most fundamentally, the dichotomy between literary and material sources arose out of the basic assumption of most historians writing in the last half of the 19th century and the first half of the 20th: namely, that history was preeminently concerned with political formation and, therefore, should study the public spheres — the men, ideas, and strategies which constituted the "community of discourse" in a particular society and determined its direction.¹ This approach to history focused logically on "the big questions", the leaders who dealt with them, and the record of political success or failure. Equally logically, it concentrated on words, written or spoken, to discern causes, motives, and significance. Speeches, letters, constitutions, protocols, memoirs, pamphlets, diaries, despatches, and reports are the texts, the very stuff of political history to this day. Physical objects were peripheral, at best illustrative, to the main thrust of historical inquiry. Students of objects were condemned by neglect to take refuge in esoteric specialties like art history or archaeology.

In the past three decades, however, an abrupt shift of priorities on the part of younger historians has placed man-made objects very near the centre of scholarly attention. Fired often by a deep commitment to egalitarian and cooperative ideals, this new set of social historians rejected the traditional emphasis on political formation and elite behaviour and called for a "new" or "total" history which gave pride of place to the great mass of mankind: the folk, the poor, the laboring, the female, the disenfranchised, the alienated, and the enslaved. The resulting dialectical debate between the literary historians, committed to the "community of discourse", and the new social historians, concerned with the

1 It is important I think to reiterate the point made by J.G.A. Pocock that the tension is between "the literary organization of historical memory . . . [which] inscribes the continuity of governing structures in human consciousness" and advocates of a "Braudelian" *histoire totale* which draws on such fields as archaeology and linguistics to discover social structures "unencumbered by the subjectivities of memory" and which emphatically reject the view that "history is past politics". This historiographical difference is sometimes reduced to a facetious distinction between "documentary" history and "artifact" history. I have yet to encounter a historian of any stripe who doubted the validity of artifacts as historical evidence. For Pocock, see "The Limits and Divisions of British History: In Search of an Unknown Subject", *American Historical Review*, 87 (April 1982), pp. 316-21.

totality of a human society, continues unresolved. One clear result of this important development has been the need of social historians to generate new sources of evidence for the groups they study, most of whom were both illiterate and inarticulate. The application of quantitative measurement and computer-based analysis has been one imaginative and remarkably fruitful response to this need, as the flood of studies charting family composition, demographic patterns, and aggregate wealth readily attests. Surpassing even these mathematical tools in its capacity to illuminate the simplest rhythms of life is the historical artifact — the remains of house, tool, dish, garment, or religious relic which even the humblest required to cope with their physical environment and provide meaning in their lives.

Thomas J. Schlereth, head of the American Studies Program at Notre Dame University, has compiled a wide-ranging anthology, *Material Culture Studies in America* (Nashville, Tennessee, American Association for State and Local History, 1982), which traces the history of artifact-based research in the United States and offers representative examples of current approaches to theory and practice. The *Material History Bulletin/Bulletin d'histoire de la culture matérielle*, published by the National Museum of Man, has served as the principal Canadian forum for object-based research since its inception in 1976. Taken together, these works provide a detailed account of the subject areas under investigation and permit an evaluation of the state of this new field in North America which uses man-made objects or artifacts as the basis for elucidating the cultural patterns of the past.

Schlereth's *Material Culture Studies in America* is an extraordinarily ambitious work. Rather than confine himself to a single disciplinary approach, Schlereth takes on the whole world of "material culture", which he defines as "the totality of artifacts in a culture, the vast universe of objects used by humankind to cope with the physical world, to facilitate social intercourse, to delight our fancy, and to create symbols of meaning" (p. 2). This omnibus approach has substantial justification in the actual evolution of artifact-based studies, as Schlereth demonstrates in his long historical introduction. Since objects were excluded from most formal academic studies, the development of a scholarly methodology for their study was exceedingly eclectic, at times almost wayward. Contributions from both the humanities and the social sciences, as well as the special requirements of museums and private collectors, have given artifact study a strong multidisciplinary orientation. Schlereth chronicles the odyssey of material culture studies from its amateur, filiopietistic beginnings after the American Civil War to its current entrenchment in highly specialized research groups, devoted to linking the several fields of "American Studies" and bridging the gap between academic and museum concerns.

Schlereth's historical sketch is fascinating, surely a must for any researcher interested in the use of artifacts as evidence. He describes appreciatively the manifold ways in which objects have been studied to reveal aspects of the Ameri-

can past — from traditional authentication procedures to vast historical reconstructions to quantitative measurements of stylistic diffusion. The effect is protean: imagination, energy, and promise leap from every page. Yet from the viewpoint of a self-confessed literary historian, the effect is also dismaying. Although Schlereth tries heroically to control his material by creating an elaborate series of categories, the vital centre eludes him. The lack of anything akin to a disciplinary core or clearly defined limits undermines his claims for the existence of a new field of study. For example, within the space of one page Schlereth indiscriminately lumps together a psychohistory by John Demos of family housing and emotional expression in Puritan Massachusetts with an essay in contemporary archaeology by William Rathje analyzing the contents of household trash cans in Tucson, Arizona. This linking of widely disparate inquiries, this attempt to mix historical apples and oranges by means of artificial categories and a naive faith in jargon (“praxitic perspective”, “ethnosemantics”) are doubtless typical for a new intellectual enterprise. But the academic recognition which Schlereth so insistently demands from “the official historical establishment” will only come with more clearly stated goals and sufficient rigour in their pursuit.

The essays selected by Schlereth for his text display the same mixture of good and bad. The good, let it be emphasized, is very good indeed. Schlereth divides his anthology into three sections — “Theory”, “Method”, and “Practice” — and there are articles of value in each. Particularly impressive in the “Theory” section is the statement of pioneer folk historian, John A. Kuowenhoven, which champions the vernacular arts as the best evidence for understanding the great mass of humanity. Kuowenhoven rejects both elite and literary approaches to history in favor of nonverbal forms because they are the vehicles through which the majority of mankind have expressed themselves. He further asserts that simple, folk objects are more “truthful” evidence of the past because they represent the “untutored responses” of ordinary people to the challenge of their environment. Kuowenhoven’s claims have not, of course, found universal acceptance, but they do provide a trenchant example of the ideological thrust of many material historians. Of the other theoretical contributions, Steven M. Beckow’s emphasis on the object as the product of a conceptual process which reveals human needs and values is well worth consideration, and Henry Glassie’s description of the capacity of folk art to reveal the traditional, rhythmic values of a society is masterful.

In the succeeding two sections on “Method” and “Practice”, it is significant that most of the abstract statements of method tend to be either fuzzy or narrow, while the actual monographs illustrating object-based research achieve a very high standard of scholarship in most cases. Clearly theory has not yet caught up with practice in this burgeoning field, and attention seems best repaid by attending to what material historians do rather than what they think they do. Only E. McClung Fleming succeeds in laying out a step-by-step research model

that integrates the object with other fields of thought and historical activity. For historians in general, this question of the object's larger cultural significance is fundamental, and more extended discussion would have been welcome on the means of elucidating the complex relationship between an historical object and its milieu. In this respect, I especially regretted that Schlereth's anthology skipped so quickly over the work of the structuralist historians, emanating from the *Annales* school, and the methods derived from art history by Jules David Prown.² Although very different in their research emphasis, both Prown and the structuralists combine a specific commitment to historical studies with extensive use of allied disciplines, and both seek to uncover basic cultural assumptions through analysis of artifacts.

Schlereth's sampling from the monographic literature includes some acknowledged classics. The article by James Deetz and Edwin S. Dethlefsen, "Death's Head, Cherub, Urn, and Willow", displays their innovative means of relating the changing images of gravestones to larger cultural and population trends. The authors correlate the various properties of gravestones — style, epitaph, cost — with intellectual and religious currents in 18th century Massachusetts in order to expose significant urban and rural variations. Their precise methodology has been widely emulated by students of cultural diffusion. An even more ambitious study of such diffusion is offered by Fred Kniffen and Henry Glassie, "Building in Wood in the Eastern United States: A Time-Place Perspective", which traces folk housing from its European origins to its replication in wood by various immigrant groups in North America. This work is part of a larger projected study of folk architecture and is necessarily full of technical detail. Its ability to span vast time periods and cultural groupings within tightly controlled limits is unusually impressive.

Three more conventional articles use historical artifacts to investigate the internal dynamics of the American home, particularly the roles of its female inhabitants. Woman's history, like that of other "minority" groups, has benefitted especially from the new emphasis on material research, since so little of her past is recorded in conventional literary sources. The articles selected by Schlereth show how subtle such historical treatment can be. Especially noteworthy is Kenneth L. Ames' "Meaning in Artifacts: Hall Furnishings in Victorian America". With careful documentation and acute sensitivity to the values people attach to domestic arrangements, Ames explores the classic Victorian hall to discover the social drama enacted therein. Objects such as mirrors, umbrella stands, and calling cards played a central role in the many social transactions which took place in these halls, and Ames describes their multiple meanings in a way that contributes new understanding of the Victorian personality.

The values attached to domestic furnishings by working class women were

2 Readers will wish to consult Prown's latest and most comprehensive statement, published too late for inclusion by Schlereth: "Mind in Matter; An Introduction to Material Culture Theory and Method", *Winterthur Portfolio*, 17 (1982), pp. 1-19.

equally intense. Elizabeth A. Cohen opens up this virtually unknown subject by showing how the acquisition of plush, elaborately decorated furniture symbolized being at home in industrial America for immigrant women at the turn of the 20th century. As for middle class women, Ruth Schwartz Cowan reports a diminution of their status as a result of technological innovation. In "The Industrial Revolution in the Household: Household Technology and Social Change in the Twentieth Century", Cohen suggests that household appliances and modern advertising have reduced the middle-class matron from a proud household manager to "just about the only unspecialized worker left in America — a veritable Jane of all trades . . ." (p. 236). Both Cohen and Cowan rely on printed sources rather than direct artifact research for their basic data, but each suggests the potential relevance of studies which explore woman's interactions with her domestic environment.

It is instructive to look at Canadian practice in the context of this survey of American experience. Published usually twice a year in inexpensive but pleasing format, with copious illustrations and full scholarly apparatus, the *Material History Bulletin* includes technical reports, book reviews, and critical reviews of museum exhibits and historical reconstructions. The centrepiece of each issue is a set of scholarly monographs which provide the *Bulletin's* cutting edge and have made it the Canadian spokesman for this new subject area. In surveying the *Bulletin*, I had access to issues numbered 3 to 18 and randomly sampled the contents of all. I read through the three issues which seemed of greatest relevance to *Acadiensis* readers: No. 8, "Canada's Material History: A Forum", which contains the proceedings of a conference on theoretical aspects of artifact-based research, held in Ottawa in 1979; No. 15, "Colloquium on Cultural Patterns in the Atlantic Canada Home", held in St. John's, Newfoundland (1983), and No. 17, "Material Conditions and Society in Lower Canada" (1982).

Bearing in mind John Kenneth Galbraith's injunctions about "the dubious virtue of an open mind", I shall hazard some general impressions of the *Bulletin* before commenting more specifically on these three issues. Material history research is clearly a less developed field in Canada than its American, British, or French counterparts. Except for some significant new work on early Quebec, the research reported is almost exclusively museum-based and makes very limited use of current theoretical approaches. Nonetheless, the *Bulletin* displays a much clearer focus on the discipline of history than the selections in Schlereth's anthology and is blessedly free of "pop" sociology and other such fancies. In my view, this bodes very well for its growth and acceptance as a scholarly publication. Finally one must note significant differences between French-Canadian and English-Canadian contributions. The French-Canadian offerings draw on the rich tradition of social history developed in France to construct a comprehensive socio-economic profile of early Quebec. The English-Canadian offerings have not yet settled upon a theoretical approach, but they are notably more concerned with the object itself — its physical properties,

maker, technology, style, diffusion, and symbolic meaning. This interesting difference in research goals only confirms, of course, what the cultural historians have been telling us all along: namely, that different cultural backgrounds will produce different behaviour, different objectives. So far as Canadian scholarship is concerned, these two distinct approaches could double the ultimate yield.

The most theoretical issue, No. 8, illuminates these points. Three types of contributions are discernible: reports on material history research in other societies by three invited scholars from away; individual statements respecting work going on in English Canada, and a description of the research goals and methodology of a major collaborative research effort into early Quebec social history. Thomas J. Schlereth is the American representative and summarizes the important historical essay which forms the introduction to his anthology. Alexander Fenton, author of *Scottish Country Life* (1976) and Keeper at the National Museum of Antiquities of Scotland, reports on the use of linguistics, human geography, and folk architecture to discover the origins of Scottish rural history. Fenton concludes by describing the archival system used at his museum to classify data ranging from crops and livestock (including vermin) to larger social and political agencies. This brief, comprehensive essay is a most instructive example of material history in action. Joseph Goy, director of historical research at the Ecole des hautes études en sciences sociales in Paris, makes an equally notable, albeit distinct, contribution. Goy's presentation synthesizes the major approaches to French social history since 1860 and describes succinctly the four main fields currently under investigation: history of technology, socio-economic analysis, medieval archaeology, and industrial archaeology. Brief summaries simply cannot convey the range and depth of both scholarship and experience in these contributions by Fenton and Goy, and readers are urged to go to the source.

The contributions from English Canada vary considerably. Barbara Riley of the National Museum of Man leads off with a challenging statement which unfortunately was not pursued in later papers. Riley asserts that material historians are encumbered by two handicaps in their attempts to develop a systematic research method which is integrally related to other fields of historical study. First, academic historians have failed to get involved in artifact research, forcing the museum historians to fall back on art history and the social sciences. And secondly, the influence of both connoisseurship and antiquarianism has crippled attempts to study material evidence in their full historical context. Both Riley and her colleague Fred J. Thorpe evince a clear commitment to historical methods, buttressed by judicious borrowings from allied disciplines.

John Mannion, a geographer at Memorial University, is far more expansive in his definition of material history — the "entire cultural landscape", natural and man-made — and in his call for multidisciplinary approaches. Like Riley, Mannion is severely critical of the historical profession for failing to train their

students to study historical artifacts. The burden of Mannion's article, I infer, is to question our current disciplinary categories. Jules Prown has also wondered about "the lessening usefulness of a distinction between the study of human beliefs, values, and history on the one hand and the study of human behaviour on the other, and the need for a new term to encompass those disciplines that study the interaction of human belief and behaviour, whether historical or contemporary".³ To my ear, Prown's query sounds very much like Mannion's repeated reference to material history as "multidisciplinary". If so, this is surely a fundamental challenge to received notions of history and suggests that the emergence of this new sub-field may well entail some philosophical stock-taking by all historians.

The remaining articles in English are more narrowly concerned with research techniques, and the contrast offered by French-Canadian scholars could not be more complete. Here a single theoretical approach has been adopted, a method mapped out, and an enormous research project undertaken. The basic rationale underlying this study is outlined in No. 8 by Jean-Pierre Wallot of the University of Montreal in "Culture matérielle et histoire: l'étude des genres de vie au Canada". It would be impossible as well as unfair to summarize this vaulting statement. Wallot's prose is so seamless as it moves from theory to practice to promise that one wants only to sit back and admire its texture and lucidity. Wallot announces a "histoire totale", applying all possible sources — literary, quantitative, material — in order to reconstruct the "mental universe" of the people of Lower Canada on the eve of modernization. He draws on the social sciences and modern philosophies of knowledge to explain how subjective and objective worlds will be related in this study and finally settles upon notarial records — wills and estate inventories — as his most important data base, because they cut across all social categories and include information on both public and private life. This encyclopedic undertaking, with its need for an elaborate data base and much cross-disciplinary analysis, is described as an experiment in social theory which will yield a more profound understanding of the process of social evolution. In a companion piece, Jean-Pierre Hardy and Thierry Ruddel (who later merged their project with Wallot's) show how they propose to use artifacts and notarial records to recreate the world of Quebec artisans during the same period of commercialization.

This is heady stuff. Although ample European precedents exist for such a structuralist analysis, this is the biggest effort in North America to construct a "histoire totale". It is still in the research stage, but an informative progress report has been published as No. 17 of the *Material History Bulletin*: "Material Conditions in Lower Canada: Post-mortem Inventories". The four project leaders — Hardy, Ruddel, Wallot and Gilles Paquet — offer an opening statement assessing the value of the inventories "in providing a context for artifacts" and enabling socio-economic historians to measure the "stocks" of an economy.

3 *Ibid.*, p. 10.

They report that they fully expect, through sampling of the inventory records of Lower Canada over the period from 1792-1835, to construct a profile of the socio-economic base and identify the moments and forms of "rupture". The authors describe their methodology and classification systems, and then preliminary reports on several subareas are presented.

Paquet and Wallot report on changing levels of wealth in the countryside; George Brevan on the property and material goods of the administrative elite; Hardy on property and household interiors in a working class district; Ruddel on the shift from homespun to imported cloth in the textile industry, and Christian Dessault and Lorraine Gadoury on diversification in agriculture. All of these monographs are careful, precise studies, backed by pertinent tabulations and illustrations, and punctuated by intriguing details from the lives, the labours, and the luxuries of the Québécois during this important moment of transition. In short, this is an impressive study of social structure. But is it material history? Aside from some comments by Ruddel on the role of fashion and technology in textile production, I did not encounter an object in the course of this entire issue. True, objects are mentioned nominally all the time, but only as data derived from the inventories for use in measuring economic value and social status. The real topic in issue No. 17 of the *Bulletin* is not artifacts but wealth. It is a very important topic, but only in the loosest sense can it be termed material history.

I press this point because I believe that if material history is to become a separate subject for investigation, a distinct subfield, it needs definition and limitation. Extending material history to include the landscape or the entire social structure opens up Faustian possibilities which will surely lead to perdition. An acceptable definition of material history can only, of course, be devised by the actual practitioners through their field work, and it must be integrated with other historical approaches. But surely material history will centre on a preoccupation with the direct evidence offered by the artifact — its form, function, substance, design, fabrication, cost, history, and above all, its meaning to particular humans as an expression of need and aspiration. Rather than permit the artifact to be submerged into any large scheme, its greatest contribution will be, in my view, to become an independent object of study. Only then will its special insights regarding man as maker, user, and sentient being be realized.

These conclusions can be better expressed by reference to my final example, issue No. 15 of the *Bulletin*: "Colloquium on Cultural Patterns in the Atlantic Canada Home". By juxtaposing this set of studies with the Lower Canada social history project, it is possible to get new perspectives on the nature of artifactual evidence and its application. Yet it would be misleading to overstate the merits of the articles in issue No. 15. Aside from three well-conceived presentations by Kenneth Donovan on family life in 18th century Louisbourg, Thomas Lackey on ancient folk motifs in Lunenburg furnishings, and Donald Blake Webster on Maritime colonial craftsmanship, the articles in this issue

suffer from thin research and narrow historical perspective. Several in fact appear to be background reports prepared for museum exhibits or antique collectors, rather than full historical monographs. Some rely heavily on oral interviews, memory, or nostalgia without adequate cross references.

These criticisms notwithstanding, the focus of the articles in No. 15 is private life as expressed in the domestic household. There is a concerted effort to probe what Fernand Braudel (echoing Marx) has termed "unconscious history", to get beneath the world of external events and objective language in order to uncover the vast interior worlds of subjective experience.⁴ The actual subject matter in this issue of the *Bulletin* is familiar, even homey: kitchens, wallpaper, furniture, family life, sexual privacy, neighborhood parties, and memorably, wakes. The significance lies in the direct concentration on the objects and the effort to elicit from them a sense of everyday rhythms, an insight into the feelings and priorities these objects represented in the past.

In a noteworthy survey of current historiographical trends, Bernard Bailyn speaks of the use of nonverbal forms "to compose pictures of the inner experiences of less cultivated people".⁵ Surely the most primary and most rewarding of all nonverbal forms is the historical artifact, and herein lies the greatest potential contribution of material history. By combining an informed knowledge of historical context with a disciplined appreciation of the artifact's properties and its unique capacity to reflect sentient life and symbolic meaning, the material historians can open up a new vista upon the human past. To do this authentically will require a firm grounding in historical studies and familiarity with the work of other fields concerned with object research: art history, anthropology, and archaeology have long been in the field; semiotics and psychohistory have recently offered new perspectives. Much depends on adequate scholarly training. Reading through these journals, I was impressed by the repeated complaints of museum people regarding scholarly neglect. I was also impressed by the frequency of formal gaps in their presentations. Canada is far behind other societies in its artifact-based research and in its training facilities for museum scholars.

Clearly this is a challenging and intricate curriculum, but the benefits are palpable and especially relevant for Canadian history. For Canada is, of course, a congeries of folk peoples, come mainly from somewhere else, whose need to eke out a livelihood from this harsh northern environment has confined them for most of their history to very minimal levels of literacy and cultivation. For such a people, the artifact is a much more meaningful, comprehensive point of contact than the word. Thus one clear reward of the growth of material history

4 Fernand Braudel, "Time, History, and the Social Sciences", in Fritz Stern, ed., *The Varieties of History: From Voltaire to the Present* (New York, 1972), p. 420.

5 "The Challenge of Modern Historiography", *American Historical Review*, 87 (February 1982), p. 21.

studies would be to penetrate the common, ordinary heritage of the Canadian people.

A second consideration, of special pertinence to Atlantic historians, arises from the capacity of artifacts to transcend political boundaries and locate human communities in larger world settings. While all of us working in Canadian history can resonate to the poignant Mexican lament — “So far from God, so close to the United States” — our studies are in fact often ill-defined by nationalistic formulas. The tendency of the styles and symbolic meanings of artifacts to cross oceans, follow trade routes, and circle polar hemispheres is well known in general terms. Thomas Lackey’s article in No. 15 of the *Bulletin*, “Folk Influence in Nova Scotia Interiors: the Lunenburg County Example”, shows how effectively European decorative traditions can be linked to a small Maritime community. Similar links could be made by means of artifact study for other communities and enrich our appreciation of their cultural origins.

A third, more pragmatic advantage of this area of study is the fact that many of its results can be presented in exhibits as well as published form. Obviously this can open up new ways for historians to reach the general public and new avenues for collaboration between academic and museum scholars.

Why Canadian historians have been reluctant to embrace the evidence of the artifact is an interesting question. Surely objects reflect cultural values as much as intellectual constructs, and surely students need historical perspectives in order to interpret these artifacts within a framework of time, continuity, and change. Perhaps it is the visceral character of artifacts, their resistance to words, and their emphasis on the irrational responses of feeling and spirit, which sends historians scurrying back to their documents. I can sympathize with that. But is the artifact’s call for an “affective mode of apprehension”⁶ really so different from Hegel’s search for the *zeitgeist*, or Huizinga’s inquiry into *homo ludens*, or Becker’s vision of a heavenly city? There has always been an irrational element in the best historical studies, an abiding concern for human passion and human ideals. The material historians can give us a new means of plumbing this fundamental reality. Speaking as an Old Whig contemplating the advent of the New Whigs, I for one bid them welcome.

ANN GORMAN CONDON

6 Jules David Brown, “Style as Evidence”, *Winterthur Portfolio*, 15 (1980), p. 208.