

01:506:401 History Seminar
History and Material Culture
Professor Jennifer M. Jones
Rutgers University, Fall 2021

The sheen of silk, the aroma of roasted coffee, the piercing weight of chains, the crackle of a transistor radio, the punch of a time card, the saccharine surprise of a child's first bite of Pop-Tart We live in a material world and we connect to the past not only through words and texts but also through material objects. Food, clothing, furniture, buildings, tools, toys, heirlooms and souvenirs, instruments, and technology shape people's lives, mediate their social relations, and activate and reproduce their values. We will explore how historians have used the objects that people in the past touched, viewed, heard, smelled, and tasted to analyze and interpret their worlds. The meaning of things is never completely transparent: material objects might reinforce, contest, or undermine entrenched power relations based on sex, gender, class and race in a given society. The study of things provides a particularly illuminating approach to understanding the past.

The course will introduce students to the key theoretical literature and methodological approaches concerning the history of material culture and the interdisciplinary field of Material Culture Studies. Students will gain experience writing object-based histories. Although the course will focus on developments in Europe and America, we will be attentive to the histories of material culture in non-Western and global contexts and students are welcome to explore research topics outside of US and European history. All final research paper topics must focus on a period before 2000.

Format:

The first half of the semester will be devoted to five broad case studies:

- The History of Coffee, from the Café Procope to Mr. Coffee
- Luxury objects in the Age of Marie-Antoinette
- Slave Wrecks Project (SWP) National Museum of African American History and Culture and the Fashion and Race Database (<https://fashionandrace.org>)
- Daily Life of Working-Girls, from Lowell Mills to the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory
- The Culture of the Baby Boom in the USA & Western Europe

Seminar-style discussions will place a premium on participation and discussion. Weekly discussions will draw on short articles and primary sources available online or on the course Canvas website.

In addition to several shorter papers, students will each write an 18- to 20-page research using primary sources on a topic they develop in consultation with the professor. Students will submit multiple drafts of their final essay and will provide peer review of their classmates' essays.

Required reading:

Anne Gerritsen and Giorgio Riello, *Writing Material Culture History* (2021)
Daniel Miller, *Stuff* (2009)
Journal of Material Culture (essays to be assigned)