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The “Turn” and Other Turns
Museum Anthropology and Material Culture Studies in Russia

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The “Ontological Turn” in Russian Anthropology
Le « tournant ontologique » dans l’anthropologie russe

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Résumé de l'article

Les changements de perspective et la révision abrupte des cadres disciplinaires essentiels sont à l’origine à l’origine de plusieurs tournants dans les sciences humaines et sociales (les tournants « matériel », « ontologique » et autres) qui ont parfois été traités comme des mystifications contraires au bon sens. En réalité, de tels changements peuvent être extrêmement productifs dans la recherche de nouvelles connaissances. Cela est particulièrement important pour l’anthropologie, une discipline déterminée à « franchir les frontières », à aller au-delà du social et de l’humain, et à rechercher des perspectives extérieures à partir desquelles interpréter la culture humaine. Cet article examine plusieurs cas d’études russes sur la culture matérielle, en partie inspirés par la connaissance des idées alternatives (mythologiques et folkloriques) sur les choses. Une emphase spécifique est mise sur les études muséales de la culture matérielle. J’aborde, en particulier, la question de savoir pourquoi l’anthropologie des musées russes résiste obstinément aux tentatives de réévaluation de la perspective anthropocentrique dans les études sur la matérialité.

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Dmitry Baranov
The Russian Museum of Ethnography

Abstract: Changes of perspective and abrupt revision of the essential disciplinary frameworks are at the root of several turns in the humanities and social sciences (the "material," "ontological," and other turns) that have been treated sometimes as mystifications contrary to common sense. In reality, such shifts can be extremely productive in the search for new knowledge. This is particularly important for anthropology, a discipline committed to "crossing borders," extending beyond the social and the human, and searching for external perspectives from which to interpret human culture. This paper discusses several Russian cases of study on material culture, partly inspired by the acquaintance with alternative (mythological and folklore) ideas about things. Special emphasis is placed on museum studies of material culture. In particular, I address the question of why Russian museum anthropology stubbornly resists attempts to re-evaluate the anthropocentric perspective in materiality studies.

Keywords: Materiality studies; ethnographic museum; turn; reicentrism; perspectivism

Résumé : Les changements de perspective et la révision abrupte des cadres disciplinaires essentiels sont à l'origine à l'origine de plusieurs tournants dans les sciences humaines et sociales (les tournants « matériel », « ontologique » et autres) qui ont parfois été traités comme des mystifications contraires au bon sens. En réalité, de tels changements peuvent être extrêmement productifs dans la recherche de nouvelles connaissances. Cela est particulièrement important pour l'anthropologie, une discipline déterminée à « franchir les frontières », à aller au-delà du social et de l'humain, et à rechercher des perspectives extérieures à partir desquelles interpréter la culture humaine. Cet article examine plusieurs cas d'études russes sur la culture matérielle, en partie inspirés par la connaissance des idées alternatives (mythologiques et

folkloriques) sur les choses. Une emphase spécifique est mise sur les études muséales de la culture matérielle. J'aborde, en particulier, la question de savoir pourquoi l'anthropologie des musées russes résiste obstinément aux tentatives de réévaluation de la perspective anthropocentrique dans les études sur la matérialité.

Mots-clés : Études matérielles ; musée ethnographique ; tournant ; re-centrisme ; perspectivisme

Introduction

The author is a museum anthropologist, and it might be reasonable to expect that this article would focus on the cases of various turns in studies of material culture that took place in ethnographic museums.[1] However, when it comes to materiality studies in Russia, the emergence of new perspectives on the world of things paradoxically has been connected with philology rather than with ethnography and museology that had traditionally specialized in material culture. Nonetheless, one can speak about the non-anthropocentric perspective in museum studies only with a great deal of conventionality, because this perspective, for instance, description of human society through the "eyes of things" is applied rather as a methodological approach than the testimony of recognition of ontological plurality. What are the specifics of material culture studies in Russia? Why did Russian ethnographic museums find themselves on the periphery of the "material," "ontological," and other turns?[2] Why was it philology that had a noticeable impact on material studies? These questions are the subject of exploratory discussion below.

For a long time, ethnographic museums were leading centers in the studies of material culture and at the heart of academic ethnography both in Russia and in the West (Ames 1986; Dias 2001; Shelton 2000). Prior to the emergence of professional field research, museums were major sites of anthropological work, and Russia was part of this global trend in the development of ethnography. In the early twentieth century, the St. Petersburg Kunstkamera and the Ethnographic Department of the Russian Museum (currently the Russian Museum of Ethnography) became the leading national centers of ethnographic research for the academe as well in the eyes of the public.[3]

Over time Western scholars became increasingly skeptical about museum anthropology. This change was influenced by Franz Boas who, after several years

at the American Museum of Natural History, became convinced that material objects cannot adequately reflect culture (Cruikshank 1992, 5). The very idea of thing as a material-and-symbolic whole was questioned, while materiality studies became marginalized and regarded as a secondary, old-fashioned discipline too opaque for the new, "advanced" theories and perspectives. By the mid-twentieth century museum ethnography was reduced to empirical descriptions of collections and so-called primitive technologies (Pearce 1994; Shelton 2000; Stocking 1986). Later, studies of collections became even more marginalized as museums became regarded as material manifestations of colonialism from which most anthropologists were eager to distance themselves.

Materiality studies were aligned with the conservative character of the museum as a social institution tasked with the storage and preservation of material objects. As such, the discipline was not deemed capable of contributing to cutting-edge developments in the field. Furthermore, the very materiality of objects was a constraining factor for the humanities. While the very materiality of objects created an illusion that their scholarly description and analysis were an easy task, the studies of physical characteristics were left to the sciences. As a result, materiality was poorly problematized in humanistic disciplines. In Russia, developments in studies of material culture only partly overlapped with Western trends. In the 1930s, when interest in materiality began to fade, "thingism" (*veshchism*, a fetishization of things) had acquired negative connotations within the Soviet context of a new discourse of modernization. Features of museum objects, such as archaicness, ornamentality, sacrality, exoticism, and rarity endowed the exhibitions of traditional cultures of the Soviet peoples with romanticism. While necessary to raise public interest, romanticism failed to address the declared task of "showing the radical changes and achievements that the October Revolution brought to the Soviet peoples" (Potapov 1932, 95). All exhibitions at the Ethnographic Department of the Russian Museum were immediately reconfigured in accordance with the official objective of demonstrating that the contemporary period (the 1920s to the 1930s) had brought huge advances in the lives of the Russian people as compared with the pre-revolutionary era. The new exhibitions, unlike those arranged at earlier periods, combined two principles for the selection of exhibits. Decorative and characteristically "ethnic" objects were predominantly used to exhibit old ways of life. In the case of traditional Russian culture, this created an "archaic-festive" impression. On the other hand, modernity was represented by urban and decidedly *unethical* ("socialist") objects, making the Soviet part of any

exhibition appear detached from reality, emasculated, repetitive, and boring no matter which particular people happened to be the subject of the exhibition. The extraordinarily rich collections of objects from the 1890s and 1900s and the colorful set designs depicting this period completely overshadowed the photographs and diagrams depicting village life in the 1920s.

Amongst the Soviet museum staff, "thingphobia" emerged. To quote V.G. Bogoraz-Tan, then employed at the Kunstkamera, "Once you are free from things, these objects will no longer attack you, they won't commit the acts of violence against the exhibition organizers that they used to, whether in old museums or in new ones" (Staniukovich 1978, 200). Unsurprisingly, the First All-Russian Museum Congress of 1930 produced a radical slogan that called for the replacement of the "display of things" with a "display of ideas" (265). The Moscow ethnographer, Sergey Tolstov, also insisted that "we need to officially proclaim and stick to the following slogan: 'Not a single unnecessary thing in the exhibition!'" (quoted in Alymov et al. 2014, 349). This sentiment was echoed by Aleksei Mansurov: "[The museum] must speak intelligibly, interestingly, and in a few words. Things must be characteristic and expressive. Piling them up is unnecessary… Instead of showing as many things as possible, we should make sure that they act as a persuasive medium for ideas" (quoted in Ivacheva 2012, 11).

But attacks against reicentrism (from the Latin *res*, plural *rei* - thing/s) failed to affect most ethnographers; the dominant viewpoint remained that such studies were necessary and valuable. According to the ethnographer Boris Kuftin, "The advantages of studies [of material culture] emanate from the very nature of comparative ethnology, since even a complex fact of social life, when encapsulated in a material object, can be easily described and verified" (Quoted in Alymov et al 2014, 349).

Several pre-WWII exhibitions with a decidedly art-historical orientation marked a new trend in representational practices, which was a compromise between the interests of ethnography, on the one hand, and ideological requirements, on the other. There was also a cautious rehabilitation of ethnographic objects, or more precisely, of those objects which could be classified as works of folk art. The recognition of the aesthetic value of ethnically marked objects was the first step towards a re-evaluation of objects, and also of folk traditions. In the 1950s to the 1970s, museums actively purchased products from artistic craft enterprises, which according to museum ethnographers,

testified to the formation of new cultural integrity of the peoples of the USSR. At the same time, both in society and in the social sciences, the process of rethinking traditional material culture began. If earlier the bast shoe (*lapot*) and the folk pinafore dress (*sarafan*) were symbols of backwardness, now rural items have become an integral part of national identity.

The growing public interest in traditions was a kind of social reaction to the modernization of all aspects of life, accompanied by the breakdown and disappearance of traditional culture. The threat of complete loss of objects of rural culture sharply increased their cultural value, which in turn served as an impetus for the intensification of both the collecting activity of the museum and the material culture studies. Finally, what helped to maintain an interest in material culture in the USSR was the attribution of things to certain ethnic cultures, by then a major task of ethnography. Ethnographic museums aimed to represent an "ethnic portrait" of people through material representations. In the 1970s to the 1980s, in Soviet ethnography, the tradition of determining the ethnicity of material objects was interpreted as the "ethnographicity" of objects. Alexey Konovalov and Yevdokiya Timofeeva, scholars at the State Museum of Ethnography of the Peoples of the USSR in St. Petersburg (currently the Russian Museum of Ethnography), coined the term, "the concept of an 'ethnographic object'" (1987). "Ethnographicity" depended on the object's features, including:

- Form
- Material
- Method of manufacturing
- Ornamentation
- Narrative
- Usage

To be ethnically marked, an object had to be described in special categories. For example, the form or method of manufacturing had to be defined as ethnically-specific. Thus, the ethnographic status of an object was defined not through its immanent features, but rather through its interpretation.

Ethnic identification of material objects helped to define the object of the Soviet ethnography – *ethnos* – and situate people in time and space. Material cultures were linked with specific ethnic groups. Each ethnic group received a tangible, material basis (that continues to serve as a basis for primordialism). Even though ethnography was under fire in the USSR during the early 1930s,

the museum remained an institution that, through its collections, made the very object of ethnography – ethnos – visible.

Overall, in Soviet ethnography, the study of material culture was of a peculiar nature. Even though utilitarian, "technical" features of objects were described in ethnographic works, and their materiality was analyzed and theorized about much less than other features. Ethnographers tended to look at things as a mirror of social phenomena, while their materiality was removed from the picture. An influential Soviet ethnographer, Sergei Tokarev, argued that "an ethnographer is not interested in things by themselves, but rather in their relationship to people… It is not so important for us to know a thing's relation to a human, or a human's relation to a thing, but rather relations between humans with regards to this particular thing" (Tokarev 1970, 3).

Studies of material culture remained applied to a limited range of questions, such as the origins of ethnic groups and their kinship relations, cultural contacts and trade relations, the dependence of objects of material culture on the natural environment, and their relations with rituals and art. A lack of interest in the "material in things" among Russian ethnographers was often justified by a statement made by Tokarev: "An ethnographic study of clothing would turn into instructions on dressmaking, a study of food – into a recipe book, a study of vernacular housing – into a section in an architecture textbook" (Tokarev 1970, 3). Because the humanities disciplines were predominantly interested in the social, human "dimension" of things, their physical materiality remained a domain of the sciences.

The Linguistic Turn

This view began to change in the 1970s and 1980s with a renewed interest in things. A fresh look at the world of material objects required a certain distance from materiality itself, so it is not surprising that a new approach to the study of things in Soviet ethnography did not come out of museum studies; instead, it was rooted in the linguistic and literary studies of the Tartu-Moscow Semiotic School headed by Yuri Lotman (in the 1960s and 1970s). This Russian cultural theory continued the traditions of the Russian formal school in literary criticism of the 1920s and was an alternative to the official Soviet historical science. Within the framework of this direction, as well as the ethnolinguistic one, headed by Nikita and Svetlana Tolstoy (from 1970 to the 1990s), the studies of material culture began to define their subject as a form of reading centered on the text[4]. Philological metaphors questioned the very status of the thing as a document,

and this led to a deep institutional crisis of the ethnographic museum and an eventual paradigm shift. A positivist perspective was replaced with a "linguistic" approach whose main argument was that things acquire meanings as part of a structure. As per Saussurean semiotics, this approach to material culture implied that the meaning of any object is relative as it is constituted by contexts and revealed through relations to or a juxtaposition with other things. In the 1980s and 1990s, the semiotic approach began to be applied to museum studies of material culture. Some of the brightest representatives of this approach are Albert Bayburin in the Peter the Great Museum of Ethnography and Anthropology of the Peoples of the World (Kunstkamera), Alexander Ostrowsky, and Oleg Lysenko of the Russian Museum of Ethnography.

The new linguistic turn in the studies of material culture accentuated the semantic and symbolic functions of things and largely solved the task of symbolically describing the world of things and finding general principles of the semantization of things. But along with progress in the study of the "language of things," problems emerged. One of the main and obvious among them was the dominance of the extensive path, that is, the search for meanings was associated mainly with the expansion of the field of application of the "semantic" approach. Another difficulty was that the identification of the symbolic language of a thing and its decoding took place in isolation from the physical properties of the object, which often made such constructions speculative. Moreover, a total "symbolization" of the material world proposed primarily by language and literary scholars deprived things of their instrumental function. To a large extent, this solved the task of describing the symbolic language of the object world. A five-volume ethnolinguistic dictionary that provides detailed "mythological dossiers" of almost every object of the Slavic world (Tolstoy 1995–2012) is a prime example.

While one can hardly suspect the research carried out in terms of the Tartu-Moscow Semiotic School in non-anthropocentric approach, later in the 1980s philological studies in the material world discovered the agency of things and their ability to act.[5] Philology blurred boundaries between the object and the subject and incorporated various perspectives, often borrowing from fiction, folklore, and myths. Such translation of objects into people, known from the "mythological register," became a concept that described relations between people and things as a subject-subject relationship. Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of polyphony, when applied to material objects, allowed things a voice.

In Tatiana Tsiv'ian's research on material objects, she notes that

> the world of things that have been produced, guarded, and maintained by humans acquires autonomy, independence from, and even power over, them. By transforming itself from an object into a subject, it, in turn, maintains and protects humans, provides for their welfare sometimes for entire generations, and thus outlives humans. By acquiring power over humans, it shapes the human image… (Tsiv'ian 2001, 123).

By emphasizing the subjectivity of things, Tsiv'ian refers to things' abilities to enter into equal, and sometimes competitive, relationships with humans (137). Vladimir Toporov's work, *An Apology of Plyushkin: The Thing in an Anthropocentric Perspective* (1995, 17), advocates for the necessity of endowing things with subjectivity. He argues,

> It is indisputable that things also play their parts in which they dictate their will to humans, and an 'anthropocentric' position in regards to things does not exclude a purposefulness of the 'material' perspective on humans. Not only is "man the measure of all things," but, up to a certain degree, "things are the measure of all men" (ibid., 17).

However, this perspective is not entirely "object-centric." As Sveshnikova and Tsiv'ian demonstrated in their research on kitchenware in folklore, kitchenware was identified with humans not only through terminology (such as body, neck, mouth) but also through personification and agency. Kitchenware has a voice and can speak; an empty pot can cry with hunger; folklore texts interpret this as an ability to communicate as a participant in dialogue (1997, 346). A pot is born, lives a life, and dies, as reflected in Russian riddles, such as "Who was dug out, melted, spun on a wheel, burnt in a fire, sold at the market; when young he could feed a hundred mouths, but then he got old and had to be swaddled." Moreover, kitchenware can move around the house and even relocate other things (356). This example points to a particular kind of reicentrism of such descriptions of the world of material objects, based on the identification of things with human qualities when human features are attributed to things. But could this point of view be called non-anthropocentric? Obviously only in part if one takes into account the subjectivity of things. In other respects, it is difficult to see anything special in things that would differentiate them from people.

Until recent times, the studies of material culture were dominated by conservative approaches; one focused on the empirical description of "matter" (materials, production techniques, utilitarian functions), another on the

analysis of the "symbolic" (semantics, ritual functions). The latter approach continued the tradition of symbolic interpretation in the European humanities that sought to look behind the materiality and functionality of the object to find far-reaching analogies in all things and eventually attain the symbolic image of the macrocosm. These two modalities of the manifestations of the life of things were largely studied separately and failed to exert meaningful influence upon each other.[6] More recently, an ethnographic interest in the materiality of objects has returned. Materiality is now referred to as empirical evidence to justify the reliability and credibility of anthropological research.

The Sensual Materiality of Things

But what is materiality in the anthropological perspective? Is it the true essence of the thing? Obviously it is not, because the very concept of materiality is anthropocentric. But lack of tangible density and means to penetrate an object does not necessarily mean this object is immaterial – it might seem so only within human senses.

The "visibility" and literal resistibility of things are determined by their very "corporality," which they have in common with people. Toporov emphasizes,

> features of the thing correlate with human senses, and only those aspects of the thing are open to humans that they can perceive within the limits of their senses. That is why people recognize themselves to a certain degree, as if in a fogged mirror, in the features of a thing-object. They are the subject of the perception of the thing's features (1995, 29).

The material, form, size, proportions, texture, color, weight, design of things are features that bring things into the domain of material culture, while at the same time affecting human senses.

The act of sensing things suggests a different perspective on art and language in the cognition of material objects. The stimulation of senses by a "body-thing" is nothing but its resistance-deisis vis-à-vis humans, as first expressed by Heidegger and later used by Latour. But whereas for Heidegger information provided by the senses remains ontologically irrelevant (1977), for ethnographers the "sensing" of things by people becomes semiotically meaningful.[7]

In recent years, museum studies, especially at the Russian Museum of Ethnography, saw a shift towards materiality that traces how physical properties of an object determine the rules of interaction with it and shape its symbolic image and shows how design and usage of things constitute the

image of its owner (Baranov 2005). The thing stops being "neutral," while its features become associated with certain values because the meanings emerge through a correlation with the notions of life-death, truth-lie, good-evil, as well as thorough evaluations of objects that have positive or negative meanings (Tolstaya 2002, 16).

Humans are active vis-à-vis things, but can only do what things allow them to do. A clay pot is a good example of how the physical properties of the material it is made of determine the rules of how to use it. Fired clay is fragile: a pot can crack or break into pieces. This natural property becomes semiotically meaningful in ritual. In peasant households, pots were broken to mark certain life passages symbolizing a change of status for participants in the ritual. During difficult labor, a pot was broken with a prayer (see the Russian-language metaphors for labor that emphasize its "destructive" aspect: *razreshit'sia* (delivered (of)) *rassypat'sia* (poured out (as in "fall apart")) *raskutat'sia* (unwrap). In baptism, ritual pots were broken and porridge was served on top of the pieces. During weddings, the bride's relatives broke pots in the morning and a pot was thrown onto a stove with the wish of "as many children as there are broken pieces." Funeral rituals included breaking the pots used to wash the deceased and leaving the pieces at the grave. These acts symbolized the end of life for both the human and its "twin" – the pot. Such properties of clay as fragility, which is not intrinsic to metal or wood, determined the inclusion of the pot in the rites of passage, where the subjects' status changed through the destruction of the old for the creation of the new.

At the same time, the hardness of fired clay transformed the pot into an irreplaceable partner in household magic: when cabbage was planted, a pot was placed upside down onto a patch, "so that the cabbage-head would be as stiff as the pot." Indeed, the pot became a co-participant of important events in human life, while at the same time living a human life cycle, as reflected in the following riddle: "I was born in a mountain of stone, baptized in a river of fire, brought to a market, a girl came and hit with her golden ring my scattered bones which will not rest in a coffin, nor will be there a funeral repast."

This approach avoids a disjunction between the material object and the symbolic that was postulated by semiotics (Krutkin 2017) and instead shows their mutual connection. Something outside the limits of human senses is central to an anthropological perspective. A "contact zone" – the zone of human senses to which things appeal – endows sensuously perceived objects with instrumentality. When a useful, "good," and utilitarian thing becomes "bad"

or even "dangerous," this is because some of its material properties correspond to pre-existing negative values. Attributing "dangerous" features to a thing indicates that it broke free from human control and, consequently, reveals the beginning of its autonomous existence when the thing becomes a nuisance or even the enemy of humans. In sociological terms, the thing can constitute humans.

In the peasant household, a carrying pole (*koromyslo*) is an arched yoke used to carry buckets, pails, and baskets, usually made of linden, willow, and aspen. Its arched, or crooked, form allows equal distribution of the carried weight. In symbolic classification, crookedness has strong fiendish connotations: the word *krivoi* in its meaning of "crooked" can be used euphemistically to refer to the devil. Correspondingly, a carrying pole acts as a "bad" thing in ritual practices. In childbirth rituals, a pregnant woman avoids stepping over it. In baptisms, a godfather would bring water without using a carrying pole. In both cases, the ban on its use prevented a child from growing humpbacked or sick. A carrying pole, while being useful in its practical functions, begins to "resist" its owners, thus setting itself free from its subordinate status. Following their "emancipation," things do not necessarily remain loyal to their masters. From this perspective, things are something that humans always have to reckon with.

Can the cases discussed above be described in the object-oriented framework of Latour, Law, and others who erase the difference between subjects and objects, humans and things, the framework which makes the earlier ethnographic dualism of material and spiritual culture increasingly irrelevant? The object-oriented perspective suggested a new configuration of the world as if seen through the "eyes of things." When Latour abolished the difference between the subject and the object, he used an essentially anthropological approach and turned everything upside down, against all common sense. Yet it is difficult to imagine a reverse situation when things want something, while humans prevent them from reaching their goals. Anthropology can take such a proposition seriously only as a rhetorical device, a metaphor. When it comes to the agency of objects, the agency takes the form of resistance rather than direct action and intentionality, since the initial impulse of human-object interactions always originates with the human. This is why the position of Gell is better suited and justified for anthropology: as Gell suggests, animals and things can possess reason and intentions, but this reason and these intentions are attributed to them by humans, the only logic that humans can understand (1998, 17). Things have agency only in the human presence since they cannot be actors by themselves.

Technology and Instrumentality of the Thing

Another trajectory in the studies of the material world places emphasis on the technology of thing's production and instrumentality. These works further develop Heidegger's instrumental approach to objects based upon an assumption that our basic relationship with objects represents our reliance on them to achieve certain goals. At the same time, these works revisit the foundations of archaic cosmogonies, in which things are primarily instrumental, used to produce other things, and functions of education and naming are more important than the individuality of the thing (Tsiv'ian 2001, 121). This understanding of production technology is common for folklore, which focuses on the materials from which things were made and the manufacturing process.

The technological aspect of things can be interpreted as a result of symmetric relations between humans and nature. Stanisław Lem in *Summa Technologiae* noted that "at first glance, technology is a result of man's and Nature's activity because it enacts that to which the material world gives its silent consent" (2004, 52). Heidegger in his concept of the instrumentality of things placed a special emphasis on technology, which he understood as a means and the human activity itself. The thing here represents a result of interaction between four types of cause on one side, and, on the other side, humans who bring the causes together. According to Heidegger,

> The four ways of being responsible bring the thing into appearance. They let it come forth into full presenting. They set it free to that place and so start it on its way, namely, into its complete arrival. The principal characteristic of being responsible is this starting something on its way to arrival (1977, 9).

Technology thus acts as a process of explicating the implicit nature of the thing.

Nature represented by the material from which things are made determines the grammar of this universal "language:" the material is active insofar as manufacturing technology invented by people is determined by the nature of the material. One cannot sow clay or burn linen, wood cannot be molded, and metal is not woven. Even techniques and designs of decorations are determined by the natural characteristics of the material and the specifics of manufacturing technology. Museum studies of textiles carried out by Oleg Lysenko, the research fellow at the Russian Museum of Ethnography (1992) demonstrated how technological particularities of woven belts translate into visual designs and determine features of ornamental patterns. Thus, the

diagonal weaving technique with which the belts are made forms the main type of ornament – a rhombus, which creates more complex ornamental structures. In this case, the visual plan, that is, the ornament, is associated with the type of weaving – the constructive plan of the object. In belts made using the vertical-horizontal weaving technique, the rhombic ornament and its elements are transformed exclusively into a visual plan, repeating images of elements formed in the previous techniques of twisting and diagonal weaving. Here, the ornament is no longer subject to the technique of designing a textile product. In other words, elements of the design have their origins in the technology, rather than in the intentions of producers. Ornamental elements acquire their semantic content post factum, and this content is rarely arbitrary, as it is imposed by the character of ornamentation (ibid.). Reflecting on emerging tension between an object and an ornament Lysenko writes: "having appeared as a constructive element ornamental structure starts to live its own life producing its own space. This specific response reaction, a mimicry of thing to the aggression of nature in which it submerges" (ibid.).

Another museum ethnographer, Stanislav Petriashin, places a special emphasis on the instrumentality of things. In his recent works on museum collections, he applied Gibson's affordance theory, which postulates that things influence people because they encapsulate cultural meanings and mediate social acts, but also as material substances with certain characteristics that suggest or prohibit certain acts and practices, that is, as having the capability to act in certain contexts (Petriashin 2019a). Using the "Russian" spring scale (*bezmen*), Petriashin examines how the materiality of objects limits how they can be treated. Since the human sense of weight is subjective and does not allow for a precise measurement of weight, this work was delegated to the scale. The procedure of weight measurement with a spring scale was perceived as a guarantee of an objective measurement of the weight of things and identification of a just price, and consequently, the scale was very much trusted. At the same time, the design of the spring scale paved the way to manipulation and fraud, as the equilibrium point in a spring scale suspended on a thin wire or rope was difficult to find. Owners of a spring scale could meddle with its measurement at will, choosing where to weigh honestly or to cheat (ibid.).

The possibility for both honest and fraudulent weighing inherent in the materiality of the spring scale determined the ambiguous attitude of Russian peasants, projected onto the scale owner. However, this ambiguity only characterized the world of the market trade, where actors were equal

and a peasant could suspect a merchant of deceit. In the patriarchal family world, where hierarchy and authority reigned, the spring scale and its owners symbolized justice and judge with the right to punish, respectively, which was revealed in the use of the spring scale in ritual games, simultaneously as a weighing tool and an instrument of punishment (ibid.).

In the practical sphere, museums have carried out only the first steps that could be interpreted as material shift. In 1995, the exhibition-installation "Ornament: Myth and Structure," dedicated to the 100th anniversary of the birth of V.Ya. Propp, was opened in the Russian Museum of Ethnography. In this exhibition, for the first time, an attempt was made to show how ornament appeared in textile, how it developed together with the construction of the object of thread, and how incorporating it into a textile structure formed a visual image of the object. Another example is the 1994 exhibition "Cosmogonic Notions of Russian People," which opened in the same museum. One of the exhibition sections was dedicated to the representation of traditional technologies of flax treatment from "the point of view" of a seed. In this perspective, such operations as pulling, rippling, breaking, scutching, spinning, and weaving were shown as the stages of testing the flax for the purpose of transforming it into a fabric with a higher cultural status.

The Individuality of the Thing

Most ethnographic museums are still dominated by the approach that deindividualizes things, tending to ignore singular things with unique biographies that cannot be reduced to an average type, and instead focusing on typical things that reflect common cultural phenomena described as social, ethnic, productive, and/or ritualistic. As Tsiv'ian noted (2001, 126), even such a distinctive type of museum research as cataloging that deals with extensive paradigms of things often deprives each specific thing of meaningfulness and, consequently, reality.

This demarcates, too, the interests of ethnographic museums with the desire for classifications and the interests of ethnography towards detail. The orientation to collect "typical things" characterized early ethnographic museums in Russia. Among European scholars, by the mid-1980s, material studies disappointedly looked only at things as a category rather than a thing per se, and thus were anthropocentric, in that things are interpreted as "witnesses" of something and provide information on anything other than themselves. Even in material culture studies in the museum, objects act as representations of

a certain classification paradigm or a cultural context. Sokolovskii discusses this distinct feature of museum studies when each specific thing is interpreted only through those properties relevant for comparisons. Sokolovskii argued,

> in such an approach, a specific thing becomes interesting for an ethnographer as a piece of evidence of something else (cultural history, ethnic contacts, migrations, influences, etc.), but not per se. An encounter with the thing in its physical materiality does not happen here at all, or – more precisely – takes place within a strictly limited mode of interpretation that immediately reduces a thing to an item in a typological classification of similar things. The uniqueness of a thing (in the literal sense, for each thing is unique) under this approach is either discarded or (when a thing cannot be absorbed into a classification group) perceived as a riddle and a stimulus for a deeper search of similarities (2016, 8).

When a thing is deposited in a museum, it comes to represent a social sign, not material individuality. The museumification of material objects means, as Stránský argues, a shift of focus from "things per se" to their "museality" (Ananyev 2014, 78). The museum form of an object's life implies the obfuscating of those important physical properties that define the pragmatic of its use in its original environment. The very idea to use things like signs, according to Baiburin (2004), is foundational to the emergence and functioning of museums. Museum inventories employ a depersonification of things. How a certain thing was produced, what "resistance" of the material its creator had to overcome, whether it survived its owner or the owner survived it – this information is important for the understanding of the "nature" of things, yet tends to be missing in museum inventories and thus in museum studies and representations of material culture. The preference is for semiotic functions of things, interpreted as abstract types rather than one-of-a-kind artifacts.

Museum ethnographers have nevertheless attempted to recognize the individuality of things. Mikhail Epshtein's concept of *realogy* describes the nature of individual things, "realogy cognizes the real world not only in abstract terms and not even in more specific images, but through individual objects, and seeks for the best ways to describe and understand endless 'this-ness's.' The individuality exists, and therefore it matters" (Epshtein et al. 2003, 346). A "flat" ontology that does not differentiate between properties of the thing has become important; for example, a registry of every crack, scratch, spot, piece of dirt. But it is often the spots, scratches, and other marks that endow a thing with individuality that brings it closer to humans. Traces of time in a material object

are a kind of visual evidence of its biography that includes not only a social status of things and semantic shifts, but also the dynamics of its material characteristics, such as fragmentations, losses, deformations. The history of museums shows how detailed descriptions are critical to the re-identification of the objects, following the loss of objects' identification number.

Despite cautious recognition of the importance of considering the individuality of things by museum workers, museum reductionism continues, especially during the initial collections phase when collections are acquired. A collection is imbued with meaning and value as a whole larger than the sum of its parts. According to Baiburin (2004, 82), "it has been long noted that every separate item in a collection can have no particular value, but a collection made of 'useless' objects can acquire an immense value." The common ground that brings its constituent parts together is centred around a certain concept, such as a collection of spinning wheels, a collection of ceramics, or a collection of vehicles. These are all a hierarchy where parts are subordinate to the whole, and thereby the uniqueness of each object (part) in the collection is marginalized.

Yet, beyond such reductionism, meanings and semantics of a collection are seen as irreducible to its constituent parts. The logic here is that not only is the whole bigger than the sum of its parts, but instead, the singular nature of the thing cannot be accommodated in the whole, since a thing is a "universe of individuality." Things are made of constituent parts that can be much bigger than the physical object comprised of them.[8]

A critique of the reductionist nature of a collection should not be interpreted as a call to reject any structuring classification of things. Here I draw attention to the instrumental and arbitrary character of classifications of the material world that tend to analyze just one or several aspects of the lives of things rather than analyze an object in terms of the stages of its biography. The autonomy and uniqueness of the life of a thing are revealed when a closer look is given at the relationships between biographies of things and their owners. As a rule, either an object or a human outlives the other. In the latter case, it is perceived as a person's separation from their past. (Tsiv'ian 2001, 124). With an object, the continued life of the thing after the death of its owner transforms it into a material sign of that person's memory. However, when a thing is incorporated into an ethnographic museum exhibit it loses its individuality and is transformed into a mere item among an endless paradigm of things.

In a certain sense, the recognition of an object's individuality raises the question about its agency. For an ethnographic museum, it would have meant recognition of its inadequacy as an institution, because museum activity is based on the control of the objects' movement and their meanings, and therefore, it implies asymmetry of relations between people and artifacts. However, the very idea of objects' "agency" is close to the heart of museum workers, but this is predominantly part of the "behind-the-scenes" discourse and is sometimes used by ethnographers in their professional activities. For example, when organizing and inaugurating exhibitions, colleagues apply the practice of sacrifice and invite a shaman to sanctify exhibition, etcetera. Every museum ethnographer can tell a lot of stories about the "coming to life" of exhibits, moving mannequins, and "spell" of certain objects, but these stories belong exclusively to the oral folklore of museum tradition, and are not made part of research discourse. I remember conversations with museum colleagues in which the idea of the description of the collection, the exhibition, and research activities of the museum from the objects' "point of view" was discussed. However, similar changes of perspective were regarded more as intellectual games than approaches with the serious heuristic potential of becoming studies of culture.

Vanishing Materiality

Ethnographic classifications have traditionally placed food in the section "Material culture," yet within the "ontological" or "material" turns, food is often ignored or marginalized. This lack of interest in food in materiality studies is related to "vanishing materiality." Food is a category of material objects produced only to be destroyed. The turn to "things" announced by new materialists in anthropological research will translate into new attention on changing materiality.

Material properties of things are a precondition for their transformation into museum objects; in fact, museums themselves exist thanks to the materiality of things. Food presents a paradox: It is material, but in the majority of cases its materiality is so unstable that it poses a challenge for the museumification of food. First, the purpose of food is to be consumed, not stored. The temporal cycle of food in culture (its short life and regular reproduction) contravene the museum's agenda of storage and exhibition. Second, food is perceived through olfactory and taste receptors, while museums tend to comprehend objects

through the visual. A major challenge for ethnographic museums, as Kotilainen noted (2007, 52), is their reliance on one or two senses and their lack of attention to taste and smell, key components of many ethnic food cultures.

The Russian Museum of Ethnography and Kunstkamera rarely display food as a topic, though all departments feature food indirectly. Sometimes eating is shown in the background as an everyday activity, and at other times food is represented as part of culture defined by meal preparation. Food museumification thus presents unique challenges. Replicas of food, such as bread and pastries, appear regularly in exhibits. But more often food appears in exhibits as objects related to themes such as "traditional economy," where agricultural produce, stoves, grills, utensils for cooking and storing food demonstrate the ways of cooking, while tables, tablecloths, plates, and cups recount dining rules and etiquette, as well as the distribution of status through food and seating positions at the table.

But museum displays including replicas, photographs, ethnographic films, and multimedia presentations cannot convey the taste and smell of food or feelings of unity at the table. Vanishing materiality as the quality of food has meant that food is missing from museum manuals, reference books, and guidelines on material culture objects. To make food "visible" and discover the Heideggerian "world's presence" in it, it is critical that the stages in a food's life path are seen: from its growth in or extraction from the natural environment through its processing and storage, to the cooking and consuming of food.

Scholars of the Russian Museum of Ethnography (Baranov, Gulyaeva 2017) argue that from a technological and material aspect, food can be interpreted as a result of the symmetric relationship between humans and nature. An under-appreciated book by the nineteenth-century Russian ethnographer, Sergei Maksimov (1898), provides a remarkable ethnographic description of Russian peasant culture from a "bread-centric" perspective. Apart from showing the extraordinary role of bread in people's lives, it considers bread a social actor whose habits, whims, friendships, and animosities defined by its properties as a plant and a product completely determined the life of the Russian peasant, including the choice of locations for settlements, the quantity and design of household buildings, their tools, utensils, and daily cycle, and relations in the family and village community. Due to its natural, material properties, food makes people adapt to themselves, showing them what and how to do what with it. By exerting an effect on a person and outlining a limited range of

possible ways of getting food into the mouth, food acts as an actant. Far from reifying food, I show here the object-oriented perspective in anthropology with an emphasis on worldview, seen in this case through "the eyes of food." This is not a new perspective: Eastern Slavic calendar songs and riddles offer examples where food acts as the narrator:

> "They beat me with sticks,
> Squeeze me with stones,
> Keep me in a fiery cave,
> Cut me with knives,
> Why do they ruin me so?
> Because they love me." (Mitrofanova 1968, 125)

By overcoming the anthropocentric approach to the ethnographic description of the food, the picture of its interaction with people can take an unexpected turn. It is not people who procure and consume food. Rather, food gets inside people and, in the end, becomes a human body. According to the formula "you are what you eat," people are controlled by the demands of their bodies. In this "food-centered" perspective, all transformations of food on its way to the human mouth can be described as hardships for the sake of achieving the cherished goal, the human body. A popular folklore trope of "the life of plants," including wheat, millet, and grapes, among others, represented in songs, rituals, games, round dances, *bylichkas* (a Russian folklore genre), and riddles, describe the painful stages on the life journey of plants: from the moment they are planted to the moment they are produced into a final product. Going through these "initiations," food continues its journey as a part of the human body. This description of the food, which aims to depict the reality of food, does not only require visibility in scholarly representation but also a change in conceptual thinking.

Conclusion

The study of material culture in Russia has a long history, which has had its ups and downs. At the turn of the 1920s and the 1930s in museum ethnography, the study and exhibition of objects of traditional culture were considered a risky undertaking, since in public discourse the concept of traditional acquired purely negative and even hostile connotations, as everything traditional became a symbol of the pre-revolutionary past and could be interpreted as a manifestation of "harmful ideology." But the study of material culture did

not stop, largely due to the fact that from the 1930s to the 1960s, objects of traditional culture began to be interpreted as works of folk art, testifying to the creative abilities of the people. In addition, "ethnos" was proclaimed the main object of ethnography, the study of material culture, or rather, its ethnic specifics received an additional incentive. For the most part, material studies were descriptive in nature or played an auxiliary role in clarifying issues, such as the origins of ethnic groups, migration, cultural contacts, trade relations. Museum ethnography has acquired signs of stagnation, expressed, in particular, in the routinization of research procedures and the absence of new approaches to material research. In addition, the very conservative nature of the museum as a social institution, intended, among other things, for the storage of material objects, did not contribute to the emergence of any breakthroughs in this area.

A fresh look at the world of material objects required a certain distance from materiality itself. The new approach to the study of things in Soviet ethnography did not come out of museum studies, but instead was rooted in Russian cultural theory associated with linguistic and literary studies of the Tartu-Moscow Semiotic School. It was through texts that scholars attempted to find a key to the understanding of the nature of things. Folklore and mythological texts opened the world of polyphony; one of the loudest voices belonged to the world of reanimated things. Removal of the opposition between the object and the subject of research resulted in a productive alliance between practices and concepts. An agency of things was embraced by philologists and became a part of the academic discourse.

Yet, the assumption that things can be engaged as actants was not new for ethnography. Indigenous worldviews provided multiple examples of how social categories were projected onto the world of things, and more broadly, onto the natural world, but also of how the world could be described through the eyes of the Other – things, animals, plants. However, unlike in philology, these alternative perspectives were not interpreted by ethnographers as finished conceptual products. Until recently, it was assumed that the final understanding of an object of ethnographic interest belonged to the anthropologist. Anthropologists were seen to possess, first, disciplinary knowledge and necessary tools and, secondly, the privilege of being "above" and "beyond" the object of study. Alternative self-descriptions or Indigenous worldviews, reflected in ritual and everyday practices, as well as in folklore, were labeled as "naïve" and inaccurate, and could only serve as material for ethnographic analysis. This Euro(ethno)(ego)centric perspective remains a constraining factor in the

development of ethnography, despite Eduardo Viveiros de Castro's argument (2017) that all original anthropological theories are versions of Indigenous knowledge practices.

Influenced by philology, museum studies of material culture have only recently started to address materiality in terms of the agency of things. Materiality and physical characteristics of things are not simply regarded as testimonies or reflections of social facts but are studied with consideration of the human presence. The "contact zone" where people and things interact, and a zone of human feelings to which things appeal, has become the main focus. This is where things acquire an external, human dimension. By retaining a human dimension in the object-oriented approach, anthropology's own ontology is not overlooked, and ultimately the epistemological basis of anthropology is not lost.

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Notes

[1] Here I use the terms "anthropology" and "ethnography" as synonyms, although some Russian scholars prefer to divide these disciplines.

[2] "Material turn" has been almost unnoticed in Russian ethnography (see the discussion in Invisible Revolutions 2015).

[3] Peter the Great Museum of Anthropology and Ethnography (the Kunstkamera), one of the largest ethnographic museums in the world, was founded in 1714. The Russian Ethnographic Museum, founded on the order of Emperor Alexander III and established in 1902 as the Ethnographic Department within the Russian Museum, was conceived as a grandiose Imperial project, the main task of which was to present a picture of the "ethnographic sweep of our native land, a picture of the peoples dwelling in Russia and its immediate vicinity." Both museums are located in St. Petersburg. These museums continue to be the only large ethnographic museums in Russia up to the present time – that is why the analysis of museum studies in this article deals only with these institutions.

[4] In the West, a reaction to this approach with its disregard of the materiality of objects was the emergence of the object-oriented sociological approach that offered a perspective on the world represented as if through "the eyes of things." The conceptualization

of things as social actors was an attempt by sociologists to go outside the social and the human. Harman's notion that reality had to be perceived through "a sort of plate tectonics of ontology" that "rejects any privilege of human access to the world, and puts the affairs of human consciousness on exactly the same footing as the duel between canaries, microbes, earthquakes, atoms, and tar" (2012, 76) was an extreme version of this approach to objectivity akin to the natural sciences.

[5] Ethnographers knew that things possessed agency according to indigenous worldviews, but had failed to use knowledge belonging to the Other whom ethnographers studied, described, and interpreted, rather than learned from. Besides, even though the concept of the Other in ethnography was open to different interpretations, "non-human" agents were traditionally excluded.

[6] A similar picture could be observed in the West in the 1970s and the 1980s. Dan Hicks writes in his overview of the history of materiality studies in British anthropology that socio-cultural and material studies remained mutually isolated (2010, 69).

[7] In Europe, anthropologists such as Alfred Gell, Michael Rowlands, and others started a discussion on the role of sensory activities in the formation of material objects (Gell 1998; Rowlands 2005).

[8] Sergei Sokolovskiy refers in this context to modern physics, according to which waves represent something bigger than the objects made of them (Sokolovskiy 2016, 23).

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