Ethnologies

Material Folk Culture Research in English Canada: Antiques, Aficionados, and Beyond

Gerald L. Pocius

Volume 4, numéro 1-2, 1982

Des objets et des hommes
People and Things

URI : https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1081131ar
DOI : https://doi.org/10.7202/1081131ar

Aller au sommaire du numéro

Éditeur(s)

Association Canadienne d'Ethnologie et de Folklore

ISSN

1481-5974 (imprimé)
1708-0401 (numérique)

Découvrir la revue

Citer cet article

Pocius, G. L. (1982). Material Folk Culture Research in English Canada: Antiques, Aficionados, and Beyond. *Ethnologies*, *4*(1-2), 27–42. https://doi.org/10.7202/1081131ar

Résumé de l'article

Dans un premier temps, cet article présente une vue d'ensemble des recherches effectuées dans le domaine de la culture matérielle au Canada anglais, soulignant les mérites, les faiblesses et les partialités de celles-ci. Il s'ensuit une réitération de certains concepts de base propres à l'étude folklorique, et leur application au développement passé, présent, et futur de l'orientation de ce secteur de recherches.

*Material Folk Culture Research in English Canada: Antiques, Aficionados, and Beyond**

GERALD L. POCIUS

North American scholars have increasingly recognized the limitations of traditional data sources used in past cultural analysis, and more and more have begun to turn to the artifact as a rich if not challenging form of information. Some historians now argue that objects are not just footnotes to the past, to be used only for illustrative purposes in museums.[1] So, too, the growth of historical archaeology within the discipline of anthropology, added to an already existing interest in the artifacts of Native Peoples, has meant that the object remains an important source of cultural data for anthropologists.[2] These scholars, along with researchers in art history, cultural geography, and architectural history have in recent years argued the importance of artifacts for new sources of historical and contemporary insights.

Folklorists — especially those influenced by European regional ethnology and folklife studies — have in theory always been interested in the

---

*A portion of this essay was read at the Folklore Studies Association of Canada meeting, Montréal, Québec, June, 1980; Mac Swackhammer, Brenda Beck, and David Buchan offered kind and useful comments afterwards.

[1]For a survey of historical attitudes to the artifact see: Charles T. Lyle, "The Artifact and American History: An Examination of the Use of the Artifact for Historical Evidence," M.A. thesis, University of Delaware, 1971. A good case study written by a historian that uses objects as a new data source is: John Demos, *A Little Commonwealth: Family Life in Plymouth Colony*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1970; a recent statement by a folklorist directed at historians that argues for the use of artifacts in the study of the past is: Henry Glassie, "Meaningful Things and Appropriate Myths: The Artifact's Place in American Studies," *Prospects*, 3(1977), 1-49.

[2]Statements about recent theoretical approaches within historical archaeology can be found in: Leland Ferguson, ed., *Historical Archaeology and the Importance of Material Things*. N.p.: Society for Historical Archaeology, 1977; a concise and well-written introduction is: James Deetz, *In Small Things Forgotten: The Archeology of Early American Life*. New York: Anchor-Doubleday, 1977. Current anthropological interests are reflected in three recent volumes of the World Anthropology Series: Justine M. Cordwell, ed., *The Visual Arts: Plastic and Graphic*. The Hague: Mouton, 1979; Justine M. Cordwell and Ronald A Schwartz, eds., *The Fabrics of Culture*. The Hague: Mouton, 1979; Amos Rapoport, ed., *The Mutual Interaction of People and their Built Environment: A Cross-Cultural Perspective*. The Hague: Mouton, 1976.

study of material culture.[3] Although the North American interest in artifact analysis by folklorists is relatively recent, there are studies that all disciplines — including folklore — can draw on in researching material folk culture in Canada. While some work has been completed, serious gaps still remain in our approach to the study of folk objects. This essay will provide suggestions as to what topics still need to be researched with refined theoretical approaches. But first, the emphasis of research already conducted needs to be examined.

The study of material folk culture in Canada rests on a foundation built by the hard work of numerous dedicated amateurs, often long before the documentation of such artifacts became respectable in academic circles. What so many of these early researchers — and their present-day descendants — were interested in was often careful recording of materials, delineation of origins and distribution, and, finally, their visual presentation — be it in book form or in a museum. Like early folksong collectors, they provided compilations of artifacts, with discussion on how the artifact *per se* had changed over time. They were doing what can be considered as material history, that is, providing careful chronological compilations of specific classes of objects.[4] The artifact was the goal in and of itself. Academically we might prefer to belittle such a rationale for study, although I suspect that many of us research objects for much the same reason — we enjoy the artifact — rather than our lofty claims of advancing the knowledge of mankind.

While it is important to note that various writers interested in artifacts have sometimes been concerned with larger issues than object documentation *per se*, the general trend has been toward this artifact history approach. Those who have written about objects have usually not been associated with the academy, but rather have included professional writers, collectors, antique dealers, and museum researchers. What trends have these writers left us with in our present-day study of objects?

The study of artifacts in English-speaking Canada has been characterized by a definite pattern — bias, if you like — that has meant specific areas and topics have been investigated. The fact that these studies have focused on specific areas does not denigrate the value of these works for researchers; rather, it is important to recognize what our focus has been in order to realize what areas still remain for investigation.

---

[3]The classic statements of folklife studies in North America are: Don Yoder, "The Folklife Studies Movement," *Pennsylvania Folklife*, 13:3(1963), 43-56; Don Yoder, "Folklife Studies in American Scholarship," in his *American Folklife* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1976), pp. 3-18. A good summary of European concepts and research is: Alexander Fenton, "The Scope of Regional Ethnology," *Folk Life*, 11(1973), 5-14.

[4]Various statements about a material history approach can be found in Barbara Riley, ed., "Canada's Material History: A Forum," *Material History Bulletin*, 8(1979); note especially the essays by Robert Watt and Marie Elwood.

Artifact studies in English Canada have largely had a geographical focus: Ontario. Indeed, artifact research generally in Canada has largely been concerned with central-Canadian objects, Ontario for English, Québec for the French.[5] Books and essays frequently appear with titles that insinuate cross-Canada coverage, but more should be labelled as central-Canadian works.[6] This geographical bias may be largely due to the prosperity in central Canada which has provided a surplus of monies needed in any region for the private collecting and marketing of objects. The accumulation of things antique brings with it an accompanying desire for documentation, and hence the published studies. One need only peruse the issues of a long-running publication like *Canadian Collector* to realize through both its essays, and, perhaps, more revealing, its advertisements, where the centre for antique collecting in English Canada rests.[7]

Those folk artifacts considered as most worthy of documentation and publication have been those of the first few generations of any particular region. Every nation, every region often glorifies its first generation of settlement as the most important, and anything associated with those early days becomes almost sacred. Curiously, but not surprisingly, as you travel westward across the country, those artifacts from this earliest time period become increasingly closer to the present. Victorian pieces, for example, researched and achieving places of honour in museums in the west may be relatively recent in the east, and thus receive little attention compared to eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century objects. Our tendency when studying the artifactual past is always to research the earliest — whenever that may be — and studies that have examined later artifact periods are often fewer in number.

This emphasis on the study of artifacts related to the relatively distant past is tied to another persistent theme in Canadian material culture research. Many artifact studies appear in the guise of publications dealing with what we can categorize as pioneer life.[8] Implicity, various

---

[5]Note the predominance of Québec and Ontario studies in the material culture section of the standard Canadian folklore bibliography: Edith Fowke and Carole Henderson Carpenter, comps., *A Bibliography of Canadian Folklore in English*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1981, pp. 179-210.

[6]Typical works which claim, at least in title, to cover Canadian materials while concentrating on central Canada to the neglect of the West or Atlantic Canada are: Elizabeth Collard, *Nineteenth-Century Pottery and Porcelain in Canada*. Montreal: McGill University Press, 1967; Donald B. Webster, ed., *The Book of Canadian Antiques*. Toronto: McGraw-Hill Ryerson, 1974.

[7]A typical issue of *Canadian Collector* (vol. 17, no. 1, Jan.-Feb. 1982), for example, contained 52 advertisements, with 46 of these from Ontario.

[8]Examples are: Loris Russell, *Everyday Life in Colonial Canada*. Toronto: Copp Clark, 1973; T.W. Paterson, *British Columbia: The Pioneer Years*. Langley, B.C.: Stagecoach, 1977; earlier works with this same emphasis include: [Michael G. Scherck], *Pen Pictures of Early Pioneer Life in Upper Canada*. 1905, rpt.: Toronto: Coles, 1972; Helen E. Williams, *Spinning Wheels and Homespun*. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1923.

collections glorify pioneer lifestyles, partly for their supposed simplicity compared to modern life, and partly for the hardships and dangers that these early inhabitants had to endure. Many of these early works appeared with titles indicative of this emphasis — like Guillet's *Pioneer Arts and Crafts*[9] — while others might stress a particular aspects of pioneer pioneer life, such as the female role in the household, and the artifacts contained therein.[10] Indeed, entire museums have been set up along this pioneer theme such as Upper Canada Village, Black Creek Pioneer Village, and Kings Landing. Publications from such institutions have always emphasized the adaptiveness of the ingenious pioneer.[11]

It is ironic that past studies of material folk culture have been dominated by research on basically what is Ontario pioneer life. This irony related to how folklore as a discipline generally has been seen within the country. Many scholars have pointed out — some publicly, more privately — that folklore in Canada has generally been perceived as the domain of the non-English ethnic group. Those regions of the country most different from the dominant Anglo culture — primarily Québec, and perhaps Newfoundland — were considered as the regions where most folklore existed and could be recorded and studied. So, too, recently arrived immigrants had folklore, old established groups did not. The entire governmental policy of multiculturalism has fostered this notion; work done by federal agencies like the Canadian Centre for Folk Culture Studies has often placed more emphasis — conscious or not — on these non-English groups: Ukrainians, Mennonites, Italians, Hungarians, and the like. Such groups maintain much folklore, unlike white Protestant Anglo-Saxon Upper Canadians, so the arguments goes. The material culture research that has been carried out on these ethnic groups usually centres on the most decorative and unique aspects, often what are artifact survivals from the Old World.[12] For the central Canadian, then, folk artifacts are not part of folklore, but, instead, are part of heritage, and thus easily acceptable as part of one's own ancestral group.

---

[9]Edwin C. Guillet, *Pioneer Arts and Crafts*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1968.

[10]See: Jeanne Minhinnick, *At Home in Upper Canada*. Toronto: Clark, Irwin, 1970; Una Abrahamson, *God Bless Our Homes: Domestic Life in Nineteenth Century Canada*. Toronto: Burns & MacEachern, 1966.

[11]Publications dealing with these museums include: Wayne Barrett, *Kings Landing: Country Life in Early Canada*. Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1979; Audrey Spencer, *Spinning and Weaving at Upper Canada Village*. Toronto: McGraw-Hill Ryerson, 1964; Jeanne Minhinnick, *Early Furniture in Upper Canada Village: 1800-1837*. Toronto: McGraw-Hill Ryerson, 1964; Dorothy Duncan, *Black Creek Pioneer Village*. Toronto: Black Creek Pioneer Village, n.d..

[12]Typical examples are: Mary Tkachuk, Marie Kishchuk, and Alice Nicholaichuk, *Pysanka: Icon of the Universe*. Saskatoon: Ukrainian Museum, 1977 [easter eggs]; Michael S. Bird and Terry Kobayashi, *A Splendid Harvest: German Folk and Decorative Arts in Canada*. Toronto: Van Nostrand Reinhold, 1981.

This explains in part why relatively many studies of folk artifacts have been conducted in Ontario, while more traditional folkloric topics have been ignored.[13]

Specific types of folk artifacts have been investigated in the past, so that certain kinds of object studies become immediately associated with material folk culture research. Various rubrics are used to categorize these artifact types; probably the most common is the notion of 'arts and crafts'. Those movable objects that are also of most demand in terms of their collectability are generally those types that have been documented. Not surprisingly, furniture is one of the major types that has received repeated attention over the years. Those publications related to collectables obviously had a large public audience. As well, however, they played an important role in the work of the museum, and the authors of such works were often museum researchers interested in particular local traditions.

Museums have always played a role — both indirect and direct — in the type of artifact research that has been carried out. Since much of museum-related artifact research deals with documentation with an aim for proper display, published studies sponsored by these agencies have often been artifact surveys, with perhaps a bit of social history thrown in. Since much museum work — like oral history — involves technique, the published works rarely provided any substantial pronouncements on cultural issues through direct artifact analysis. This is not bad, however, since museum researchers have different goals than do academics, but the differences are certainly there.

The need for proper museum documentation, coupled with the popular antiques-collecting movement, has meant that many previous material culture studies have largely dealt with smaller, movable objects such as furniture and textiles. In the realm of folk or vernacular architecture, the emphasis has taken a different slant. If the earliest settlement period has been glorified in past 'craft' studies, then larger surviving structures of the elite classes have received the most architectural attention. Most research has focused on homes of public officials, early community leaders, or military establishments such as forts.[14] Like pioneer artifacts, these become icons of the past, surrounding issues like loyalty to the crown, resistance against outsiders — be they Indians or Americans —

---

[13]See: Carole Henderson Carpenter, "Folklore and Government in Canada," in Kenneth S. Goldstein, ed. *Canadian Folklore Perspectives*. St. John's: Memorial University of Newfoundland, 1978, pp. 53-68; Carole Henderson Carpenter, *Many Voices: A Study of Folklore Activities in Canada and Their Role in Canadian Culture*. Ottawa: National Museums of Canada, 1979, especially Chapter 8.

[14]Examples are: William Denby, *Lost Toronto*, Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1978; Alan Gowans, *Church Architecture in New France*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1955.

and shrewd economic and technological innovations in a harsh new land.

What we can consider as vernacular architecture has largely been overlooked, with few notable exceptions. When local architecture is written about, it is often under the guise of a local town or community history. Literally thousands of town histories have appeared in recent years with fleeting mention of buildings in the community, together with a few scattered photographs or drawings.[15] The Canadian Inventory of Historic Buildings has made an important first step in the study of Canadian architecture generally: the exterior photographing of all buildings in the country constructed before certain regional dates. Several publications based on this initial recording phase have appeared,[16] and, it is hoped, interior measurements and photographing will be as extensive as the initial recording.

Of all the various artifact types written about, those dealing with vernacular architecture often have been more analytical than other studies. Cultural geographers especially have begun not only to record architectural traditions in various parts of the country, but also to address broader issues such as cultural transfer, cultural contact and change by using the objects as a data source to investigate more fundamental topics.[17]

Over the years, much material culture research has been based in the museum or museum-related context. Academic research on objects has often been seen as at odds with museum work, perhaps frivolous, with no real purpose in mind. Unfortunately, this perception is due to a

---

[15]The number of such town histories in endless; examples are: Isabel L. Hill, *Fredericton, New Brunswick, North America*. Fredericton: York-Sunbury Historical Society, 1968; *Mankota, The First 50 Years: A Saskatchewan Village*. Mankota: Mankota Book Committee, 1980; Frances Decker, Margaret Fougberg, and Mary Ronayne, *Pemberton: The History of a Settlement*. Pemberton: Pemberton Pioneer Women, 1977; various regional bibliographies often focus on these local histories; see: William F.E. Morley, *Ontario and the Canadian North*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1978; André Beaulieu and William E.F. Morley, *La Province de Québec*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1971; Bruce Braden Peel, *A Bibliography of the Prairie Provinces to 1953 with a Biographical Index*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2nd ed., 1973; Margaret H. Edwards, and John C.R. Lort, *A Bibliography of British Columbia*. Victoria: Social Sciences Research Centre, 1975; William F.E. Morley, *The Atlantic Provinces*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1967.

[16]Christina Cameron and Janet Wright, *Second Empire Style in Canadian Architecture*. Ottawa: Parks Canada, 1980; Mathilde Brosseau, *Gothic Revival in Canadian Architecture*. Ottawa, Parks Canada, 1980.

[17]The best studies are: Peter M. Ennals, "Nineteenth Century Barns in Southern Ontario," *Canadian Geographer*, 16(1972), 256-270; David S. Mills, "*The Development of Folk Architecture in Trinity Bay*," in John J. Mannion, ed., *The Peopling of Newfoundland: Essays in Historical Geography*. St. John's: Institute of Social and Economic Research, Memorial University of Newfoundland, 1977, pp. 77-101; John J. Mannion, *Irish Settlements in Eastern Canada: A Study of Cultural Transfer and Adaptation*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1974; Peter Ennals and Deryck Holdsworth, "Vernacular Architecture and the Cultural Landscape of the Maritime Provinces: A Reconnaissance," *Acadiensis*, 10:2 (1981), 86-106.

misunderstanding on both sides of exactly what the purpose and goals of each really are.[18]

The research carried out at a museum in very practical terms is related to acquisition and display of objects. Researchers are concerned with the detailed intricacies of the object so that correct identification can be made, and the artifact placed in its correct context. For the researcher at the university, however, the documentation of the object may be only the first step in a project that may ultimately examine other issues — the object thus becomes a means to an end. The museum researcher often reads the subsequent steps as superfluous theorizing, an attempt by the academic to justify a purely personal interest in objects. The academic, on the other hand, may well see the museum researcher as content with minute detail, and not willing to address issues beyond those of provenience and dating. Both groups need one another. The academic needs the meticulous researching of the museum staff to provide a firm foundation for his more theoretical pursits. And the museologist needs the theories of the academic to enable him to see what version of history it is that is being presented to the public in the museum context. To think that museum presentations have no theoretical grounding and are just 'pure artifacts' is to remain heuristically naïve in terms of one's biases and approaches.

Material culture studies that concentrated on the more decorative aspects of artifacts have often been lumped under the rubric of 'folk art' research. Unfortunately, much of this work has exhibited the assumptions that mar earlier folk art research in other countries such as the United States.[19] Those artifacts are judged as 'folk art' whose decorativeness approaches those objects designated as 'art' by elite critics. Thus, any type of decorative painting, be it of the kind hung on a wall, or applied to furniture or some other object, becomes considered as folk art. Objects that have no decorations are often considered as non-artistic; indeed, some museums categorize objects that are decorative under the rubric of folklore, and those without such cosmetics fall under the care of the historian.

For many, folk art becomes a poor imitation of the more elite traditions; thus, one of the standard works on the subject talks about these

---

[18]See: Edward P. Alexander, *Museums in Motion: An Introduction to the History and Functions of Museums*. Nashville: American Association for State and Local History, 1979, especially pp. 157-172.

[19]The early statement containing the misconceptions still prevalent today is: "What is American Folk Art?: A Symposium," *Antiques*, 57:5 (1950), 355-362; more recent statements are: Ian M.G. Quimby and Scott T. Swank, eds., *Perspectives on American Folk Art*. New York: Norton, for the Winterthur Museum, 1980, especially the essays by Welsch and Ames; John Michael Vlach, "American Folk Art: Questions and Quandaries," *Winterthur Portfolio*, 15(1980), 345-55.

kinds of objects as being naïve, primitive, and childlike when compared to art gallery specimens.[20] The folk art that has been studied, indeed, is usually those objects that can fit easily into an art gallery or museum, be easily displayed, and often, as well, widely collected.

The study of material folk culture in Canada has proceeded largely from a bias on central-Canadian materials relating to a pioneer or heritage ethos. Good case studies on particular types have been written, however, although largely historical, and relating primarily to specific artifact types. Museum research has greatly encouraged these paradigms, with departments within the museum often created to deal with 'Canadiana'.

But what is needed now with regard to the study of material folk culture? Canadian folklife studies are really part of the larger North American scene, and thus directions needed in Canadian material folk culture research apply to the discipline as a whole. What has gone before has provided a broad if somewhat uneven base for studies in the country. A re-examination of some of the fundamental concepts that have guided folkloristics is needed for studies to advance.

Material culture research is a fundamental part of any folkloristic training, a part recent in terms of the overall past of the discipline. It was really during a widening academic base for folkloristics in the 1950s and 60s that English folklorists in North America have recognized the neglect of the study of artifacts. From Stith Thompson's survey of advance in folklore studies published in the volume *Anthropology Today* in 1953,[21] Herbert Halpert's surveys of the discipline in 1946 and 1957,[22] to Norbert Reidl's 1966 *Journal of American Folklore* essay on material culture,[23] scholars have pointed out the need to survey the vast array of traditional arts and crafts among immigrants to North America. Sixteen years have passed since Reidl's call, with over a dozen Ph.D. dissertations at various North American universities being completed on material culture, along with scores of master's theses, and hundreds of term papers and pub-

---

[20]J. Russell Harper, *A People's Art: Primitive, Naïve, Provincial and Folk Painting in Canada*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1974, pp. 3-12; a good survey of typical attitudes of art historians and museum curators toward folk art can be found in: Diane Tye, "A Contextual Study of a Newfoundland Folk Artist, Patrick J. Murphy, Bell Island," M.A. thesis, Memorial University of Newfoundland, 1981, pp. 1-22.

[21]Stith Thompson, "Advances in Folklore Studies," in A.L. Kroeber, ed., *Anthropology Today: An Encyclopedic Inventory*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1953, pp. 587-96.

[22]Herbert Halpert, "American Regional Folklore," *Journal of American Folklore*, 60(1947), 364; "Some Undeveloped Areas in American Folklore," *Journal of American Folklore*, 70(1957), 302-303.

[23]Norbert F. Riedl, "Folklore and the Study of Material Aspects of Folk Culture," *Journal of American Folklore*, 79(1966), 557-63.

lished essays in a wide array of journals.[24] Indeed, it is no longer valid to criticize the folklorist's neglect of this topic, as it has become one of the areas of most intense research interest in recent years. Instead, it is time to re-examine some of the assumptions that have guided material culture research in the sixteen years since Reidl's plea in order to provide direction for future studies.

The study of material culture has followed a definite devolutionary bent in North America, and topics that have been researched generally have had a historical dimension to them.[25] The immediate connection that is made between material culture research and case studies of salt box houses, basket makers, or untutored painters is standard. It is important to recognize, as Alan Dundes points out, that some genres of folklore *are* decreasing in popularity or usage — be they ballads or box carts — but unfortunately the assumption is often made that the study of material culture can *only* entail such genres. The choice to study any evolving or devolving genre, whatever it may be, is usually an implicit or explicit emotional and political one, and the validity of that choice is not an issue here. Rather, what I want to make clear are some of the fallacious assumptions that surround material culture research often held by those outside the field, or by folklorists working primarily in oral genres. While scholars have recognized that a wide range of oral genres has developed and flourishes in modern life — everything from urban legends, practical jokes, UFO beliefs, or personal experience narratives — very little has been written on the folkloric development of contemporary objects. The reasons for this are several.

The artifacts generally selected for study by folklorists often are survivals of the same pre-industrial rural society that gave rise to the calendar customs or Child ballads that have received a great amount of attention in traditional folkloristics. Implicity, it was assumed that the more an artifact was a product of a local design and producer, the more folk it was. An object had to be 'hand-made' by 'tools' — as opposed to machinery, although technically what we can consider as machines have been around long before the Industrial Revolution.[26] Objects following regional styles were traditional, and as mass communication increased borrowing of designs, artifacts were classified more as a product of mass society. This latter phenomonon has meant that scholars interested in

---

[24]Entire journals devoted to material culture have been founded in recent years; they include: *Winterthur Portfolio, Pioneer American, Material History Bulletin.*

[25]See: Alan Dundes, "The Devolutionary Premise in Folklore Theory," *Journal of the Folklore Institute*, 6(1969), 5-19.

[26]Jean Gimpel, *The Medieval Machine: The Industrial Revolution of the Middle Ages*. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1976.

these mass-produced objects consider themselves students of popular rather than material culture. However, the assumption that material folk culture generally encompasses technological survivals is fraught with difficulties, for often what might be designated as a folk artifact today — a swing plough or a Cape Cod house being good examples— were in their day either products of mass production or mass print.[27] The fact that they seem 'old-timey' today is a moot point if we are defining the artifacts that we study by mode of production — entirely hand-made — or whether contaminated by print. If we accept the numerous arguments by broadside scholars on the positive importance of print on tradition, then the locally built bungalow following an altered version of a government plan can be no more overlooked because of its origins in print than the broadside versions of "Finnegan's Wake" or "The Banks of Newfoundland."

This emphasis on choosing artifacts as those that are appropriate to study by how they were made tends to downplay the entire functional component of an object; for just as an artifact may be defined as folk because it was traditionally produced, so may a wide range of artifacts fulfill a *traditional function*. If, for example, the objects that are deemed traditionally appropriate for a Newfoundland front room are those that are stylistically elaborate in both design and finish, then the early nineteenth-century locally made cupboard finished in zigzag-patterned, fake-grained red ochre, the mass-produced Victorian sideboard with eclectically stylistic inlays, and today's veneered fibre-board cabinet in Spanish-*à la*-Woolco design all fulfill the same traditional function of stylistic complexity.[28] In many cases, what first appears as a devolutionary disappearance of the local object in reality is a persistent expression of particular values concerning a specific space through the use of those artifacts most readily available at the time.

Even claiming that defining the object to be studied by the criterion of local production is not entirely accurate when examining the limited range of artifacts that fall under the rubric of 'arts and crafts'. In reality, only locally made objects from a rural, agricultural era are usually considered, objects such as baskets, tools, quilts, boats, and the like. If we look at the individual creator, however, we realize that the creative process involves fundamentally a process of choice, choice among a number of

---

[27]Henry Glassie, *Patterns in the Material Folk Culture of the Eastern United States*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1968, pp. 12-15.

[28]Gerald L. Pocius, "Calvert: A Study of Artifacts and Spatial Usage in a Newfoundland Community." Ph.D. thesis, University of Pennsylvania, 1979, pp. 297-308.

design alternatives.[29] Some of these alternatives may come from fellow craftspeople, some from trial and error in the creative process — what Christopher Alexander notes as a characteristic of unselfconscious cultures — and others from printed sources, the media, or observation of objects already created.[30]

This dynamic of choice is not limited to any particular type of object created by the individual, yet somehow its presence in contemporary society has been largely overlooked. For example, probably the most widespread expression of this individual fashioning of objects is manifested in the 'do-it-yourself' activities of lower and middle class residents throughout the suburbs of the land.[31] Those skilled ion the application of numerous permeatations of stucco with gold glitter to ceilings, or pink-tinted teak mahogany plywood panelling to family basements borrow their knowledge as often from a neighbour as from a book, rarely have any formal training in building techniques, and manage to produce artifacts with what to an outsider would be the same repetition of form that marks objects designated as traditional. Michael Owen Jones points out, for example, that urban tie-dyeing involves the same basic processes that he found characteristic of traditional chairmakers in Appalachia.[32] Yet, the pre-industrial existence of a particular artifact is almost mandatory for its study, which often leaves more contemporary objects like tie-dyed shirts and stucco ceilings being dismissed as trivial. As folklorists, we have become sophisticated enough to accept the study of *re*vivals, but only of genres and items that were originally considered as *sur*vivals.

Probably the most fundamental misunderstanding that seems to be pervasive among folklorists today is that the study of artifacts somehow is concerned with more historical, less interpretive issues than other genres of folklore. The study of material culture is less theoretical, less problem-oriented than, say, the study of belief or narrative.[33] Recent folklore scholarship has tended to implicitly maintain this assumption; none of the essays, for example, in the *Toward New Perspectives in Folklore* is

---

[29]This issue of choice is discussed in: Henry Glassie, *Folk Housing in Middle Virginia: A Structural Analysis of Historic Artifacts*. Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1975, especially chapter six.

[30]Christopher Alexander, *Notes on the Synthesis of Form*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1964, pp. 46-54.

[31]Michael Owen Jones, "L.A. Add-ons and Re-dos: Renovation in Folk Art and Architectural Design," in Quimby and Swank, eds., *Perspectives on American Folk Art*, pp. 325-63.

[32]Michael Owen Jones, *The Hand Made Object and Its Maker*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975, pp. 22-24.

[33]Simon J. Bronner, "Concepts in the Study of Material Aspects of American Folk Culture," *Folklore Forum*, 12(1979), 133.

concerned to any great extent with artifact analysis.[34] The common assumption is that you either study behaviour or material culture, the former involving complex observation and theoretical analyses, the latter only photographing, dating, and documentation. This division, however, arises from a general lack of knowledge of the fundamental concept of culture itself. Indeed, inferiority-complexed folklorists attempting to becoming born-again anthropologists readily sprinkle the term 'culture' throughout their new writings where the words 'folklore' or 'tradition' once were found. However, such folklorists often have had little exposure in their training to what actually the concept of culture encompasses.[35] In spite of the wide diversity of theories as to the definition and dynamics of culture, most writers stress its intellectual basis manifested in specific human acts, be they verbal, gestural, or artifactual. All of these products of human thought are behavioural, the house as much as the ballad or marriage ceremony. The difficulty arises in confusing the differences in the *forms* the behaviours take and the unique *nature* of the form with the cognitive rules that govern these manifestations. For example, since a ritual lasts only a limited duration, and an artifact is observable long after its initial performance, these differences in form are often assumed to make the behaviours unrelated. The verbal, customary, and artifactual aspects of culture must not take on a life of their own as being the end goals of research, but rather be viewed for what they are, evidences of particular organizations of thought. What this means is that we must take heed of the old-fashioned folklife scholar's dictum that to understand a people completely we must research all their genres: you cannot, in fact, understand personal experience narratives without knowing about the work patterns, you cannot appreciate the singing tradition without knowing about architecture, and so on.[36] Unfortunately, lip service to the contrary, knowledge of material culture issues remains minimal for some scholars working in other genres, and part of this lack arises I suspect from this basic assumption that artifacts and non-material behaviours do not mix.

If we are to begin as folklorists to investigate new areas of material

---

[34]Américo Paredes and Richard Bauman, eds., *Toward New Perspectives in Folklore*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1972.

[35]The standard survey of the concept of 'culture,' although now outdated is: A.L. Kroeber, and Clyde Kluckhohn, *Culture: A Critical Review of Concepts and Definitions*. Cambridge, Peabody Museum, 1952.

[36]Good examples of cross-generic studies are: Robert Plant Armstrong, *The Affecting Presence: An Essay in Humanistic Anthropology*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1971; J.W. Fernadez, *Fang Architectonics*. Philadelphia: Institute for the Study of Human Issues, 1977; Henry Glassie, *Passing the Time in Ballymenone: Culture and History of an Ulster Community*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1982.

culture not bound by a narrow pre-industrial technological understanding of what is important, then we must begin with a re-examination of one of the most fundamental issues — what constitutes our definition of artifact. Folklorists have incorporated in the discipline the study of those objects most easily quantifiable — houses, boats, and the like. It was convenient to fit such items into a discipline already based largely on an item-oriented approach.[37] Yet from other disciplines interested in artifacts we can learn the limitations of considering only these easily quantifiable objects as indicative of culture. Larger spaces that contain these objects are themselves artifacts: the geographer calls them the cultural landscape, the archaeologist the site.[38] Just as a house contains a collection of smaller artifacts such as furniture within it, a farmstead or even a community contains a collection of buildings following a definite spatial syntax within their boundaries. Any object bounds a certain pattern of smaller units, and is a part of a larger artifact pattern as well. When we begin to look above and below our previous levels of definition, we begin to recognize more complex, and, at times, more revealing objects.[39]

We must also strive to learn more about the artifact and its styles *per se*.[40] Many studies place an object in its historical and cultural context, often to use the object as only an index of other changes; in short, they do not require artifacts analysis.[41] Archaeologists — especially prehistorians — usually have no other source of data but the object, and have to rely on details of form, design, decoration, and signs of use as sources of information. With objects of historical and contemporary periods, we often hesitate to look carefully at the object, for there are easier sources of information such as written documents or oral interviews. Yet the

---

[37]See: Henry Glassie, "Archaeology and Folklore: Common Anxieties, Common Hopes," in Ferguson, ed., *Historical Archaeology*, pp. 23-35.

[38]For the notion of landscape as artifact see: John Fraser Hart, *The Look of the Land*. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1975; also: Miles Richardson, ed., *The Human Mirror: Material and Spatial Images of Man*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1974; for the concept of site see: K.C. Chang, ed., *Settlement Archaeology*. Palo Alto, CA: National Press Books, 1968, especially the essay by Bruce Trigger.

[39]An example is my discussion of the study of interiors; see: "'Interior Motives': Rooms, Objects, and Meaning in Atlantic Canada Homes," *Material History Bulletin*, 15(1982), 6-8.

[40]A good introductory statement on the concept of style is: Meyer Schapiro, "Style," in Kroeber, ed., *Anthropology Today*, pp. 287-312; examples of stylistic studies are: Nelson H.H. Graburn, "'I Like Things to Look More Different Than That Stuff Did': An Experiment in Cross-Cultural Art Appreciation," in Michael Greenhalg, and Vincent Megaw, ed., *Art in Society: Studies in Style, Culture and Aesthetics*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1978, pp. 512-70; Gerald L. Pocius, "Newfoundland Traditional Crafts: Types and Stereotypes," *Artisan*, 4:5(1981), 15-20.

[41]Jules David Prown, "Mind in Matter: An Introduction to Material Culture Theory and Method," *Winterthur Portfolio*, 17(1982), 1, footnote 1.

more visually literate we become in terms of the object, the more attention we pay to details of style, the more the artifact becomes a new source of data, rather than one that merely supplements other findings. The artifact holds within its boundaries the visual signs of its maker; the more we recognize this semiotic dimension, the richer our work will become.[42]

This entire issue of artifact definition and level of investigation brings us to the problem of spatial concepts and organization. Readers of Yi-Fu Tuan will be familiar with many of these issues,[43] but suffice it to say at this point that for some questions of analyses it is beneficial to assume the existence of a continuum between artifact and space, and recognize the dialectical interplay between the two, depending upon the level of research.[44] What we can define on one level as a house, for example, becomes a complex interplay of spaces — rooms — at another level, and the rooms become complex arrangements of objects — furniture — at still another. These spatial issues enter the entire realm of proxemics, yet little has still been done, in spite of all the calls, in this middle spatial range between large-scale settlement patterns and micro studies of individual uses of space. Ironically, it probably will be archaeologists working on specific dwelling sites that will provide us with the most involved analysis of these spatial dynamics.[45]

We must move beyond our past obsession with the detrimental influences of print and mass technology on the artifacts we study, for in the end these objects are obviously all products of human thought. If we continue to be concerned exclusively with artifacts of pre-industrial local designs, then indeed these artifact types are devolving and as time passes few objects or processes will be left to study; only museum halls and pioneer villages will be prowled by folklorists interested in artifacts.

However, when we move beyond a concern solely with mode of production as a defining characteristic, and look at daily use, then the

---

[42]Introductory semiotic statements include: Jon Mukarovsky, "The Essence of the Visual Arts," in L. Matejka and I. Titunik, eds., *Semiotics of Art: Prague School Contributions*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 1976, pp. 229-44; Roland Barthes (trans. Annette Lavers and Colin Smith), *Elements of Semiology*. New York: Hill and Wang, 1967; Henry Glassie, "Structure and Function, Folklore and the Artifact," *Semiotica*, 7(1973), 313-51.

[43]Tuan's best introductory statement is: Yi-Fu Tuan, *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1977; also see: E. Relph, *Place and Placelessness*. London: Pion, 1976.

[44]Sheldon Nodelman, "Structural Analysis in Art and Anthropology," in Jacques Ehrman, ed., *Structuralism*. New York: Anchor-Doubleday, 1970, p. 88.

[45]Studies of middle-range spaces include: Albert E. Scheflen, with Norman Ashcraft, *Human Territories: How We Behave in Space-Time*. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1976; Gerald L. Pocius, "Holy Pictures in Newfoundland Houses: Visual Codes for Secular and Supernatural Relationships," *Laurentian University Review*, 12:1 (1979), 101-25.

number of issues that still need to be investigated is embarrassingly clear. All of us decorate our offices and homes, expressive of personal values and whims — do we prefer rustic barn wood or glittering stucco? We use the artifacts of clothing in our daily communication — do we dress in tweed coats, bib overalls, or disco shirts? I had students conduct an "artifact inventory" of their refrigerators in a recent class that contained both Newfoundland and mainland students, and it was not surprising that one group reported a preponderance of Dominion beer, cod fillets, Vienna sausages, and mustard pickles, while the other reported items such as yogurt, avocados, Brie cheese, and mushrooms. You eat what you are. Even with architecture, traditions persist in spite of first appearances. While a mass-produced bungalow plan has become prevalent in one Newfoundland community that I studied, it still is locally altered to fit individual desires. And while stylistically it does not resemble earlier homes in the community, I have found that spatially it still follows traditional concepts of room usage and decoration.[46]

All of us daily behave through objects, either in their creation or in their use. We place these objects within culturally defined spatial grids, be they small or large. From Joseph Jacobs writing in 1893 that "we are the folk" to Alan Dundes' recent writings on folk groups,[47] folklorists have pointed out the limitations of considering folklore as only the property of isolated small rural cultures, neglecting its existence in contemporary urban and suburban contexts. For some of the reasons given in this paper, however, a similar re-evaluation of the study of artifacts has not occurred, with the consequent danger that it will increasingly be assumed that mass technology and production have destroyed material folklore, much as it was assumed that print was destroying oral folklore. My comments here do not imply a condemnation of the study of pre-industrial artifacts, and personally I am more interested in eighteenth- than twentieth-century houses or chairs. These personal choices, however, must not limit heuristic possibilities, for within the domain of material culture studies there must be room for both. If we fail to investigate current as well as past artifact trends, then we will fail to understand the fundamental issues surrounding the choice that is made by the people we study. For choice, like change, is neutral, and can be understood only in terms of its potential for the betterment of the individual.

Memorial University
St. John's, Nfld.

---

[46]Pocius, "Calvert," pp. 246-52.

[47]Joseph Hacobs, "The Folk," Folklore, 4(1983), 233-38; Alan Dundes, "What Is Folklore?" in his *The Study of Folklore*. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1965. p. 2.

Résumé

Dans un premier temps, cet article présente une vue d'ensemble des recherches effectuées dans le domaine de la culture matérielle au Canada anglais, soulignant les mérites, les faiblesses et les partialités de celles-ci. Il s'ensuit une réitération de certains concepts de base propres à l'étude folklorique, et leur application au développement passé, présent, et futur de l'orientation de ce secteur de recherches.