

# Material Culture Review

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Lemire, Beverly, Laura Peers, and Anne Whitelaw, eds. 2021.  
Object Lives and Global Histories in Northern North America:  
Material Culture in Motion, c. 1780-1980. Montreal & Kingston:  
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## TIM COOK

Canadian War Museum

Review of

Lemire, Beverly, Laura Peers, and Anne Whitelaw, eds. 2021. *Object Lives and Global Histories in Northern North America: Material Culture in Motion, c. 1780-1980*. Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press. Part of the McGill-Queen's/Beaverbrook Canadian Foundation Studies in Art History Series. Pp. 506, 105 images, 10 maps. ISBN 9780228003991.

Objects in museums, archives, and other places of history are usually seen by the public behind glass, where they are inert, static, and of the past. In this challenging book, a team of historians, ethnologists, and anthropologists, along with other academics and Indigenous scholars and stakeholders, have come together in a remarkable project to explore the complex and intertwined history of Northern North American material culture. These are *active* objects, in motion and taking on new meanings as old stories and connections are revealed. Through both theoretical and hands-on methodological approaches, and supported by archival research and visual culture, the rich narratives of Indigenous artifacts emerge.

*Object Lives and Global Histories in Northern North America* consists of ten scholarly articles and a number of sidebars that are framed by an excellent introduction and a methodological chapter. Both introductory chapters offer insight into material culture theories applied in several workshops and meetings that were part of this project. Embroidered moose-hide jackets from Rupert's Land, the Red River coat,

toboggan suits, works of art, wampum, Arctic sweaters, Métis dolls, dew claw bags, and Indigenous art made in tubercular sanatoriums, are the core objects around which authors provide original ways to understand cross-cultural interactions, Indigenous agency, ways of conceiving of space and place, and how the material world affects northern history and global culture. The authors unravel the entangled stories around objects, often employing supporting images, maps, and oral history to better appreciate the contexts of creation, use, and movement. The methodological chapter also introduces readers to the concept of "close looking" and "slow looking," which involves the intense observation of objects through which all the parts are examined by multi-disciplinary teams who work together, handling objects, offering theories and observations—all through a collective approach. With objects at the heart of this story, the intense study of them has, according to the authors, "found ways to release knowledge within and beyond those objects" (2021, 50).

Laura Peers' study of moose-hide coats, intricately decorated and preserved in several museums, explores their creation by Indigenous women in the northern Plains and Subarctic. She documents how these objects moved in kinship networks, and how they reveal the cultural transference between Indigenous, Metis, and white traders. A complementing article by Cynthia Cooper on the Red River coat, with its iconic navy-blue colour and red piping, examines another wearable object. Asking similar questions, she furthers her arguments - with additional visual culture that better situates how these coats were worn through time and across societies.

Many of the objects studied here shaped fashion, sporting, or social trends within and outside of Canada. Julie-Ann Mercer investigates the legacy of artist Peter Rindisbacher and Sarah Carter examines Clare Sheridan, a British writer and collector in Blackfoot Country. Beverly Lemire's analysis of tobogganing and the "colonizing of winter" presents how Indigenous technology was repurposed by others outside of their society to be used in sport, leisure, and competition. In the late nineteenth century, tobogganing became a popular fad and leisure activity in northern nations, often linked to ideas of taming winter through pleasure. While Lemire ultimately positions this as taking Indigenous technology and changing it into something more frivolous, the author misses the opportunity to draw out how this technology has had a profound impact on many cultures as it was reworked, reused, and repurposed, which would have more strongly revealed the power of Indigenous influence across many societies in Canada and Europe.

In the limited space of this review, not all authors or their articles can be addressed, but each offers new ways of seeing through a close reading of objects. A study of wampum explores the multiple uses and meanings of these objects as gifts, in diplomacy, and through the intermingling of cultures. Wampum, like so many of the objects investigated (including even seemingly ephemeral objects that wear out through use), have all had "long histories" (2021, 190–91). It is against the odds that any survived, and while most authors provide a glimpse of how these objects came to find their way to museums or archival repositories, more could have been said of the motivations to save, keep, store, and make accessible these objects to allow for innovative studies like this.

*Object Lives and Global Histories in Northern North America* is part of the McGill-Queen's Beaverbrook Canadian Foundation Studies in Art History Series, which produces lavishly illustrated and high-quality books. Too often, the exploration of objects is done through limited black and white images. In contrast, this book is a feast for the eyes, with full-scale colour reproductions and maps. It is an important study for material culture scholars, public historians, museum specialists and others who seek to understand the complex lives and afterlives of objects: how they were used, how they moved across communities and impacted social interactions, and how they continue to have and acquire multiple meanings long after those who created them are no longer with us to share their own stories.