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Material Culture and the McNeil Galleries: A Review of the Philadelphia Museum of Art's Reinterpretation of its Early American Collection

By: Brianna Stolfus

In May 2021, the Philadelphia Museum of Art (PMA) unveiled its new interpretation of American art from 1650 to 1850 in the Robert L. McNeil Jr. Galleries. Part of the PMA's major \$525 million-dollar expansion designed by Frank Gehry, the galleries are the museum's first reinstallation of its substantial collection of early American art since the Bicentennial in 1976.ⁱ The galleries are organized by eight themes, including "Global Connections," "Pennsylvania Crossroads," and "Traditions on the Move," each addressing established topics in historical and art historical scholarship that call for an acknowledgement of marginalized experiences and non-Western influences in American history. The galleries' labels are peppered with descriptive words like "exchange," "encounters," and "crossroads" that underscore how global trade, enslavement, colonization, war, and immigration led to the cross-pollination of styles. I posit in this review that the McNeil Galleries' collection consistently utilizes material culture disciplinary considerations in its new interpretation. By material culture, I refer to an interpretation that begins with a consideration of the materiality of the objects, asking such questions as who made an object, where it was made, where it traveled, and how the artisan and consumer experienced them. By focusing on the collection as "material" objects first and foremost, the McNeil Galleries demonstrate how material culture as a discipline is uniquely equipped to tell a more inclusive story.

Material culture theorist Jules David Prown writes extensively about the inclusive nature

of material culture studies. In “Style as Evidence,” Prown argues that material culture studies “allow[s] us to put ourselves, figuratively speaking, inside the skins of individuals who commissioned, made, used, or enjoyed these objects, to see with their eyes and touch with their hands...”ⁱⁱ In another article, Prown comments on the “theoretical democratic advantage of artifacts” for a greater understanding of non-literate, or marginalized, populations.ⁱⁱⁱ Alexandra Kirtley, the PMA’s Montgomery-Garvan Curator of American Decorative Arts, alludes to the museum’s attention to these material culture considerations in an interview about the McNeil Galleries. She explained that in order to tell “the broader story” of the PMA’s early American collection, the curatorial staff considered the “context in which they were made,” describing the new interpretation as “mining [the works] for stories” and asking questions like “who made it,” “how did it get here,” and “where did it come from.”^{iv} In asking these questions, Kirtley underscores how a material culture interpretative framework that centers on the materiality of the collection (as objects made, bought, traded, and used) can help tell “a broader story” that includes the hidden people and places these objects encountered in their creation and use.

Each section of the McNeil Galleries unpacks these material culture considerations in different ways. The “Global Connections” gallery recognizes that material objects are useful for shedding light on diverse populations and cultures and explores the extensive distances goods traveled to and from the American colonies in a complex network of global trade. For example, the gallery includes a silver tankard from the shop of Henricus Boelen (1737-1740). The gallery’s label links the tankard to a complex network of people and places beyond the New York workshop in which it was crafted. These connections include Peruvian and Mexican laborers who were forced to mine silver for use as French and Spanish currency, as well as made to melt down silver currency to make consumables for buyers across the Atlantic world.

The silversmith who made this tankard placed a French coin in its cover, which further demonstrated the close link between forced labor, trade, and consumption in the eighteenth-century world.

The Slavery and American Art gallery makes “an important step in honoring their [enslaved artists] role” in early American art.^v In seeking to do so, this gallery dives into another central material culture question, that is, “how was it made?” Answering this question illuminates the people, and labor, involved with crafting these objects. This gallery includes a video of a contemporary artisan demonstrating repousse and raising techniques on a silver bowl. I found the video to be an extremely helpful tool for appreciating the artistry of the bowl’s design. The video also emphasized the human touch involved in the craftsmanship process, zooming in on the craftsman’s hands. It invites visitors to imagine the enslaved artisans who likely manipulated these materials into their present form with their own hands. The experience was a reminder that historical objects offer a “visceral” (to borrow Prown’s term) connection to the past: an appreciation of the bowl as physical object points to the trans-historic nature of the human senses of sight and texture. Both an eighteenth-century craftsman and twenty-first century exhibitgoers can appreciate the bowl’s beauty as something that is created, held, and viewed. In pointing to its physicality, the interpretation of the bowl as created object creates an opportunity for this “subjective” connection to previously unacknowledged enslaved craftsman.^{vi}



Figure 1 : Photo of silver Brandywine bowl and video display. Photo by author.

A wall dedicated to a variety of chairs calls to mind another point from Prown’s “Style as Evidence.” He writes that style points to “widely shared beliefs—assumptions, attitudes, and values—that are so obvious that they remain unstated.”^{vii} Additionally, he goes on to argue that the existence of a vast array of styles demonstrates the variety of beliefs and values held across time and place. Prown mentions chairs as a good example: their “configurational possibilities [are limited] by their functional requirements... Yet there is a great variety in the configuration chairs

produced in different times or in different places. This variety reflects shifts in style...^{viii} The wall label next to the McNeil Galleries' chair display asks visitors "What can a chair tell us?" without answering its own question, in my opinion, simply concluding: "Close looking can tell us about these chairs' histories and their significance to the people who once made and used them."^{ix} I agree, but it is possible to say more: it can show us the differences and similarities between cultures' views on socialization, beauty, comportment, "the good life," as just a few examples. A comparison of a chair made in Bermuda and a Campeche or Butaca Armchair from Mexico is just one case in point.



Figure 2: Chair display. Photo by author.

By collapsing the traditional hierarchy favoring painting and Eurocentric artistic traditions, the reinterpretation of the McNeil Galleries places equal value on all items in the collection as "made artifacts," a fundamental of material culture studies.^x [10] It undermines the Western tradition of placing value on paintings above functional items, instead prioritizing all

objects as culturally expressive objects that are useful for understanding the cultural context in which they were made. Furthermore, the "Objects in Motion" gallery explicitly addresses the lack of indigenous artwork, which was formerly considered in the early twentieth century as suitable only for ethnographic and archeological museums. On a wall label for this gallery, the PMA states its intention to carefully acquire indigenous objects for its collection as it works towards a more representative early American collection. Throughout the McNeil Galleries, the dismantling of artistic hierarchy is apparent, as a Pennsylvania German wrought-iron hardware, a Lenape or Shawnee bandolier bag, a Copley portrait, and a silver tea pot by Joseph Richardson Jr. in its collection are of equal value here as artifacts that “stand-in” for the marginalized people and stories that were critical in shaping early America.



Figure 3: Charles Willson Peale portrait of the Cadwalader family and card table by shop of Thomas Affleck.

The McNeil Galleries present a comprehensive, inclusive story about the stylistic influences of early America that deemphasizes virtuosity in favor of “big picture” topics that highlight the diverse cultures of North America, global trade, and slavery. This revision

highlights the materiality of these objects as physical products that were designed, crafted, shipped, bought, enjoyed, and displayed by people and for people. In presenting the collection as an array of “made” objects with connections to disenfranchised laborers, colonized places, and non-European cultural influences, the McNeil Galleries exemplify how the material culture discipline offers a crucial framework for an empathetic, broad-picture approach to early American history.

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Endnotes

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- ⁱ “New Galleries Will Present a Fresh Take on the Art of the Americas with a Focus on Philadelphia.” Philadelphia Museum of Art Website, February 25th, 2021. <https://press.philamuseum.org/new-galleries-present-fresh-take-on-art-of-americas-with-focus-on-philadelphia/>
- ⁱⁱ Jules David Prown, "Style as Evidence," *Winterthur Portfolio* 15, no. 3 (1980): 208, accessed July 27, 2021, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1180742>.
- ⁱⁱⁱ Jules David Prown, "Mind in Matter: An Introduction to Material Culture Theory and Method," *Winterthur Portfolio* 17, no. 1 (1982): 3, accessed July 27, 2021, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1180761>.
- ^{iv} The Decorative Arts Trust, “Philadelphia Museum of Art New American Art Galleries with Alexandra Kirtley,” June 24, 2021, YouTube, accessed July 27, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Gfz7Wr5L69Y>.
- ^v Wall Text, “Slavery and American Art,” Robert L. McNeil, Jr. Galleries of Early American Art, Philadelphia Museum of Art, 2021.
- ^{vi} Prown 1980, 208.
- ^{vii} Prown 1980, 208.
- ^{viii} Prown 1980, 208.
- ^{ix} Wall Text, “What Can a Chair Tell Us?,” Robert L. McNeil Galleries of Early American Art, Philadelphia Museum of Art, 2021.
- ^x Prown 1980, 198.