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Introduction

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Introduction

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This issue of *Clio. Femmes, genre, histoire* entitled *Making Gender with Things* explores the importance of material culture to historians of gender and sexuality. Unusually for this journal, we focus here on a conceptual and methodological problematic, rather than on a theme. In most of our issues, we explicate how a life-stage, a historical period or moment, an occupation, a leisure activity, or a collective action has transformed gender relations and how men and women have shaped and experienced those changes. Here, by contrast, we seek to demonstrate the utility of a particular source – objects – for gender history.

The specificity of material culture

The observation that the two capacities that define the human are language and the use of tools to make things is a commonplace, but perhaps one to which historians should be more attentive.[1] Both language and objects serve to communicate, to express thoughts and emotions, to make meaning, to remember, to dream, and many things besides. The materiality of objects, however, means that people use things differently than they use words; unlike words, things have a finite life span, they exist in three dimensions, and they are very often in intimate contact with the human body. These qualities shape the relationship between things and people. People make, decorate, buy, use, give, exchange, destroy, and throw out objects; actions they cannot take with words. Arguably as a result, things are particularly important for remembering, for self-making and communicating.

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[1] For further development of this argument see Auslander 2005.

Objects worn bear the marks of the body that has carried them, becoming a means of remembering. For example, the constant bending and straightening of the arm inscribes permanent folds in the elbows of garments, causing them to "remember". Those creases were, in fact, called "memories" by nineteenth-century English tailors.[2] This material memory is so powerful that in certain circumstances it may be necessary to destroy the objects connected with a particular event in order to forget.[3] Revolutionary iconoclasm is one example of this, but so too is the urgent need to throw out of the house the toothbrush of a lover who has abandoned one.[4]

Memory is but one use of things; making a self is another. Consumers think about the fabric, color, or cut of a piece of clothing before buying it, for example, reflecting on the relation of the clothing to one's body. Is the garment comfortable, attractive, flattering? Is it the right piece for the occasion, or the context, or one's age or status? Is it in fashion? Already being worn by one's neighbor? Some try to determine if it is feminine or masculine enough.[5] Fabricating an object, when the producer is in a position to make decisions, poses similar challenges and possibilities.[6] What wood will a cabinetmaker use for a chair? What decorations would be appropriate for an earthenware butter dish? A custom shoe- or glove maker deliberates about which leather and in what color would best suit a particular client. Which stitches should one use when embroidering a handkerchief and in which design? In each of these instances, availability of raw materials, cost, taste, and the maker's skills enter into the calculus.

To put it another way, material culture always entails personal, communicative and emotional stakes as well as pragmatic constraints. Those stakes are complicated, often self-contradictory, and not always conscious. Thus, objects can reveal affinities, country of origin, social class, geographic location, generation, religious affiliation, sexuality,

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2 Stallybrass 1998: 15.

3 Forty & Küchler 2001.

4 Clay 2012; Stites 1989.

5 Jones & Stallybrass 2000; Zakim 2003.

6 Crowston 2001.

even political position.[7] As a result of this polysemy, the objects that historical actors have left behind them can expose other "truths" of people's lives than those that they expressed in words.

Even as we defend the position here that it is because *all* human beings express themselves through things as well as words that material culture provides an important source for the study of all times and places, both genders, and all classes, we also assert that material culture is a *particularly* valuable source because most people, in most historical periods have not had access to the written word. Those working in periods of low literacy rates, like scholars of the ancient world, medievalists and early modernists, have long had recourse to material culture as a source.[8] Even in more recent times, access to speech, and particularly to writing, is neither equal nor the same for all, but varies according to class and individual trajectories. Material culture is especially important to gender historians for two reasons, then. First of all, women have had less opportunity to leave written traces than men. Secondly, because the materiality of things mirrors that of the body, gender is therefore produced through things as much, or perhaps more, than through words.

Men, women, and objects

Women have had less access to education in almost all periods and places, producing a predictable imbalance in literacy rates. Even when women know how to write, their level of mastery has often been such that they are more at ease expressing themselves through sewing, cooking, or embroidery than with the pen.[9] Girls in the eighteenth-century North American colonies, for example, often learned the alphabet not by writing it but by embroidering each letter.[10] Later in life, they created tapestries or quilts commemorating both private events (like a birth or a death) and public events of significance to

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7 Bourdieu 1979; Kamil 2005; Redhead 2013; Hunt 1984; Bard 2010.

8 Bloch 1952; Roche 1997, and a very recent example: *Dialogues d'histoire ancienne*, 2014.

9 Frye 2011; Ulrich 2001.

10 Goggin & Tobbin 2009.

them (like the death of George Washington or a battle).[11] They thereby made their homes sites of communication and commemoration. At the moment of the boycott of slave-produced goods, for example, women bought or made objects decorated with texts and images demonstrating their support for slaves or horror at slave labor. Muslim or Jewish women express their relation to religious observance through the headcoverings they choose (or refuse). A young woman who finds herself uncomfortable with the gender norms of her society might choose to cross-dress. All of these gestures leave remnants behind in attics, flea markets, or museums. The written traces of the material practices can also be found in archives, inventories, wills, letters, or police reports.

Even if more men than women had access to education, and longer schooling than women, many men did not have the opportunity for comfortable literacy and preferred to express themselves through things rather than words. The French journeymen's organization known as the *Compagnonnage* offers an example. Nineteenth-century journeymen knew how to read and write, but their most significant mode of expression was not textual, but manual; they crafted what were known as *chefs d'œuvres*, masterpieces.[12] These works of astonishing complexity challenge a simplistic image of nineteenth-century masculinity; it was an artisan's capacity to work with finesse to create a very beautiful (and often humorous or ironic) object that made him a "real man". Finally, quotidian objects are very often embellished with painted or sculpted masculine or feminine figures; the gendered form of these decorations, and the choice of ornamentation, are very revealing of the ways in which the societies in which they were made envisaged gender and sexuality.

It is also because gender and sexuality are inscribed on that body, lived by bodies, that material culture is an important source for gender historians. Almost all societies use objects to mark gendered roles at birth, adolescence, marriage, and old age as well as at the stages of sexual life. In many religions, gender is constructed through

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11 Auslander 2010: 180-183.

12 See the permanent exhibit in the Compagnonnage Museum in Tours.

prohibitions on what male and female bodies can and cannot do as well as on the objects that touch, or are worn by, those bodies. Women and men also use material culture to construct gendered bodies and sexual identities.[13] Transvestism would obviously be impossible without clothing, and sexual desire is often sparked by an object – in the form of a fetish.[14] But objects also act on women and men, changing what it means to be a woman or a man and the possible relations between the sexes.

These relations among women, men and objects are so significant that they are to be found represented in virtually all cultural forms: in literature, in diaries, letters, memoirs, paintings, prints, photographs and films. Museums organize permanent and temporary exhibitions concerned both with people and material things, and with people and things that have been drawn, painted, or photographed. These representations of objects are indispensable sources for scholars seeking to understand the meaning of the objects featured in such work. Through poetry or photography, one can understand how historical or ethnographic actors used their objects. But these representations are not merely a source through which scholars may access objects that may themselves have disappeared. The representations are actors; they teach contemporaries the meaning of things and how one can use them. This issue of *Clio. Femmes, Genre, Histoire* therefore foregrounds a diversity of approaches to material culture.

Women make themselves through objects

Three pieces in this issue address how women have used material culture to construct a sense of self, to communicate and to transmit culture. The Roma women's stacks of fabric and home decorations analyzed in this issue by Ellen Rothenberg, as well as Louise Purbrick's article on Irish political handkerchiefs, and the "Arlésienne" doll described by Sylvie Sagnes, are all examples of feminine material expression.

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[13] Knappett & Malfouris 2008; Bennett 2010.

[14] Steinberg 2001; Keane 2007; Smith 2013.

The artist Ellen Rothenberg's exploration of the textile environment of Roma women gives us access to many aspects of their lives. Through her text and photographs we glimpse: Roma women's relationship to the non-Roma world; the gender dynamics and intergenerational interactions in their community; and, women's mode of imagining the past and the future. Rothenberg's work was done in stages. First, she studied Roma women's everyday compositions in fabric and then she took on the task of translation. Rothenberg borrowed the cloth used by the women and reworked it to make new forms, forms which echo those made by the Roma, but are not identical to them. Rothenberg's artwork was then displayed in the national museum of Brukenthal. Rothenberg, who sees her project as a feminist one, chose to re-use a feminine material – fabric – to make visible the lives and aesthetic work of her collaborators, lives and work that are usually invisible in a world of words and masculine domination. Here we see women of very different backgrounds – an American avant-garde artist and teacher and Roma women who have not had access to education – coming together and communicating through things rather than words. The text and photographs show how women can use material culture to express themselves as well as to communicate and create social and emotional bonds.

In a very different historical context than that of contemporary Romania, the Irish political prisoners described by Louise Purbrick also had recourse to textiles to express themselves. Through their decoration of handkerchiefs, they reclaimed a feminine and feminist legacy, but one that had already been taken up by activist men. It is crucial here to study the handkerchiefs themselves; in written sources the women political prisoners never articulate the genealogy of this form of political action. It is only by placing the handkerchiefs within the genealogy of politicized textiles, as she does here, that Purbrick is able to elucidate the political repertoire to which these activist women had access, as well as to demonstrate the creative use they made of it. A professor of design who trains students to produce material culture, Purbrick works at the intersection of the disciplines of anthropology, psychoanalysis and history. The handkerchiefs today displayed in the homes of the prisoners' families, or in museums,

preserve and transmit both the names of the prisoners and their political practice.

This double, or even triple, play of feminine practice, transmission, and commemoration through material culture is also present in the document, *l'Arlésienne*, presented by the ethnographer Sylvie Sagnes. The collectors' dolls discussed and illustrated in this text have been made, acquired and collected by women for over a century. *L'Arlésienne* is carefully dressed, and her hair styled to commemorate individual and familial events, most notably marriage, but the doll's purpose is also to preserve the vestimentary traditions of the region. Like the political handkerchiefs and the Roma fabric, *l'Arlésienne* has a domestic purpose (the doll carries the memory of a private moment) and a commemorative one (the doll also commemorates the public past). Differently from the two other examples, however, *l'Arlésienne* links these memories to women's traditional artisanal and vestimentary practices.

The exhibition "Le Bazar du genre" at the MuCEM of Marseille, held in 2014, and referenced in this issue through an interview with its curator, Denis Chevallier, also staged a regional vision of gender. The objects on display were made by both men and women, from across the entire Mediterranean world. Very heterogeneous, the objects ranged from classical paintings to a female urinal (one that enables women to urinate standing), by way of installations of contemporary art, sex toys, and bridal gowns. The goal here was not commemorative; this temporary exhibition was intended to present everyday and artistic practices of gender and sexuality. The objects on display broke many stereotypes about the workings of gender and sexuality in the Mediterranean world, forcing the public to question their presuppositions.

We considered it essential to include an article on museums and exhibition practices in this issue for several reasons. First of all, although objects' meaning is necessarily altered when they are acquired by museums (since they were not made for that purpose), museums are key research sites for historians who seek to use material culture as a source. While descriptions and photographs of things may be found in archives and libraries, most objects are held by museums. Secondly, collecting practices and museology themselves are also a crucial object of investigation; their analysis

yields information about what a society thought worth preserving and how they ordered and classified those objects. Finally, museums are a mode of communication of knowledge on the same plane as an article or a book. Exhibitions have the advantage – and the disadvantage – of not needing to translate things into words; viewers can see the evidence of things for themselves, rather than through an author's representation.

The construction of gender by the object-actor

Three articles address how things make gender, that is demonstrate how things can effect historical change. In the case of Katherine French's article, the material agents are pottery and other tableware. Her essay shows how the fifteenth century expansion in the quantity and diversity of consumer goods on the market, as well as changes in the systems of production and distribution of tableware, permitted new forms of conviviality that modified gender relations. French suggests that an unintended consequence of these transformations was a shift in the gendered power dynamics within households. In order to contextualize the literary descriptions which are her main source, French relies on the work of historians of consumption who used death inventories, wills, customs books and tax ledgers to demonstrate these crucial changes. Collections of tableware at the Victoria and Albert Museum were also essential in order to better visualize the objects described in the texts. This article provides, then, an example of how one can approach gender and material culture through literature, while referring to the objects themselves, contemporary, written sources as well as the secondary literature.

Sarah Weicksel's short essay provides a different example of how objects act in the world. She demonstrates that the uniform of the Union army during the American Civil War (1861-1865) transformed dehumanized/demasculinized slaves into free men. In this essay, the classic phrase, "Clothes make the man," takes on new resonance. Weicksel argues that uniforms had effects both when they were *worn* and when they were *represented* in engravings or photographs. The uniforms encouraged an upright posture, associated with masculinity and freedom. Those wearing them both felt themselves, and were

perceived to be, free men. The images in the press of black men wearing these uniforms, portraying them as men, worthy of the name, amplified this political effect. The rich source base, including the clothing itself and the patterns from which they were cut, as well as photographs, engravings and written texts, enables Weicksel to reconstruct the probable effects of the uniform on the body and the goals of the representations of bodies in the press.

In Elizabeth Heath's article, the things studied – the ephemera produced in French colonial history – played a double role. They represented, but they also reproduced, gender in the French empire. As they played board games, she argues, children learned not only how to be metropolitans in relation to colonials, but also how to become white men and white women in the colonial Empire. The author also analyzes advertisements that, inserted into the intimate moments of daily, family life, and above all, moments of closeness between mothers and children (breakfast, snack-time), served to domesticate the Empire. The fact that people bothered to make board games and advertisements to teach children their imperial place tells us that there was nothing natural about living in "la Plus Grande France." Children needed embodied, material, pedagogical techniques to learn their gendered and racial roles.

Objects tell us another story than do words

Finally, the first and the last articles in the main dossier explicate how things and texts provide very different access to the past. Natalie Scholz shows how filmmakers in postwar West Germany used the objects of everyday life to tell a story that they could not convey directly through the plot. For more than a decade following the end of the Second World War, Germans lived with the tangible remains of the regime, of its crimes, and of wartime destruction. Guilt and a sense of responsibility for the collapse of German civil society was impossible to avoid, but also unbearable. The Nazi regime and wartime bombing had also wrought havoc with the gender order. This article explores the role of objects in the reconstruction of the relations between men and women in a post-war period marked by gendered tensions. Using two exemplary films, Scholz demonstrates

how the filmmakers used a *mise-en-scène* of relations among men, women and objects to address the past. But the article's contribution is also methodological; Scholz shows us how historians can approach the study of objects through their representation in film.

The first essay in the issue demonstrates that things can reveal gender dynamics even when we cannot know the intentions of those who produced or acquired them. Confronting textual and archaeological evidence from Qumran, the site where the Dead Sea Scrolls were found, the archeologist Katharina Galor argues that the evidence is strong that both women and men lived on the land situated next to the grottoes where the scrolls were found, and not just men, as scholars writing in the mid-twentieth century had assumed. The archaeological traces are too fragmentary for us to be able to reconstruct the contents of the homes, but the discovery of perfume bottles and fabric fragments worn by women, suggest their presence. Read with and against the texts, these finds allow us to question the theory that the scribes of the scrolls were celibate men living in all male communities. As in the case of French's essay, Galor shows the importance of taking both the textual and the material evidence into consideration.

In sum, we hope that the articles in this issue will convince our readers of the utility of material culture as a source, as well as provide examples of how it can be accessed and interpreted. This issue demonstrates that whether one is working in the ancient world or the present, in the Middle East, Europe, or the United States, much may be learned about gender and sexuality through things and their representations, whether in image, film, or words.

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