

January 1982

Short Subjects: A Kindred Nature

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Recommended Citation

Hayes, Martha Green, "Short Subjects: A Kindred Nature," *Georgia Archive* 10 no. 1 (1982).
Available at: https://digitalcommons.kennesaw.edu/georgia_archive/vol10/iss1/7

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SHORT SUBJECTS



Feature

A KINDRED NATURE

"An institution, building or room for collecting, preserving and studying records, documents, etc." Is this the definition of an archives or a museum? It can suitably serve as either because if artifacts are considered records or documents of the past, then a museum is closest of kin to, if not actually a type of, archives.

As the decade of the 1980s begins, it is fairly well recognized that artifacts are documentary records. To be a record, according to Webster's New World Dictionary, something must "remain as evidence," and surely an artifact remains as material evidence of the culture which created it. A document can by definition be "anything serving as proof."¹ Since proof is conclusive evidence, this concept is more complex; however, the proper analysis of artifacts, or material culture, can provide proof of the level of technology, the manual dexterity, the artistic tastes and the social practices of the civilization that produced the objects.

Taking the question of definitions one step further, those involved in the study of artifacts or material culture have proposed many working definitions of material culture. James Deetz offers one of the broadest definitions:

Material culture is usually considered to be roughly synonymous with artifacts, the vast

universe of objects used by mankind to cope with the physical world, to facilitate social intercourse, and to benefit our state of mind. A somewhat broader definition of material culture is useful in emphasizing how profoundly our world is the product of our thoughts, as "that section of our physical environment that we modify through culturally determined behavior." This definition includes all artifacts, from the simplest, such as a common pin, to the most complex, such as an interplanetary space vehicle.²

The essence of such working definitions is always the same. Artifacts are expressions of past civilizations.

The problem of using artifacts as indicators, or records and documents of the past, lies in the fact that they are not as easily "read" as the written word. Nevertheless, these nonverbal documents contain as much important information about the past as verbal documents. In fact, in the same publication, Deetz also proposes that they are more accurate records:

Yet even a primary source, having been written by one individual, must reflect that person's interest, biases, and attitudes. To the extent that it does, such source is secondary to some degree, in inverse proportion to its objectivity. Total objectivity is not to be expected in human judgment, and the best we can do is recognize and account for those subjective biases we carry with us. Material culture may be the most objective source of information we have concerning America's past.³

Connoisseurs and museum curators have understood these tenets and practiced "reading" artifacts for centuries, but only recently have historical scholars begun to take advantage of this rich data base. The reason lies in the sparsity of respectable methodologies to read the cultural

messages imbedded in artifacts.

However, models do exist. This information can be retrieved. To do so, each item must be analyzed in terms of its attributes. This begins with a description of the item, including size, shape, weight, color, texture, form, applied design, distinctive features, etc. Secondly, the reviewer must consider the function of the item. Artifacts often were created with more than one function. There is usually a technical function, whereby an object serves a utilitarian need. Often the artifact displays social functions as well. For example, the technical function of a horseshoe is to protect the feet of draft animals. The game of pitching horseshoes shows the social function. Objects occasionally have symbolic functions also. In the case of the horseshoe, it serves as a symbol of good luck when hung upside down over a doorway. How an object functioned within society is an important key to its culture message. Thirdly, an artifact must be assessed for its aesthetic value. This is perhaps the most difficult analysis because it is subjective.

All of these observations are most meaningful when careful consideration is given to understanding the cultural context in which the artifacts were produced. A comparative analysis, which incorporates many similar objects, is more informative than simply analyzing a single item. A contextual analysis, which includes a study of the social environment in which the object existed, is even more meaningful. But to whichever level or whatever extent an artifact is investigated, the study does yield pertinent information--both factual and conceptual--about the society which produced it. Looking at artifacts in this manner helps us to recognize their value as cultural statements. Artifacts are unmistakably records of the past. If one understands and accepts that material culture exists as a record and a document; and since museums collect, preserve, and make available for study these records, then museums are by nature the kin of archives.

What are the ramifications of this recognition that museums are analogous to archives? Since both institutions share similar functions, it stands to reason that consequently

both institutions have developed similar methods and processes for performing their functions. Would it not be mutually beneficial to explore and compare these systems and techniques? The sharing of resources and expertise amongst curators and archivists could lead to ready problem solving and thereby avoid expensive and time-consuming duplication of efforts. Would it not be of significant benefit to scholarship to share the audiences cultivated by each discipline? A dialog between museum curators and archivists seems in order.

Consider the systems that have been developed by each discipline for processing its collections. Each institution has collection policies. Each institution has prescribed systems for evaluating potential acquisitions and requests for access. Each institution has accessioning, registering and cataloging procedures. Aspects from any of these policies and procedures might be mutually applicable.

Consider the techniques used by archivists, conservators and curators. Each discipline has its own means of verification, material analysis, conservation and storage for documents. Sharing experiences may lead to new, more efficient ways of dealing with these concerns. Mistakes need not be duplicated.

Lastly, archivists and curators alike could better serve the researchers who use their collections if they were aware of the holdings of their sister institutions. Dialog is mandated by the fact that each generally contains some of the other's type of records; various artifacts appear in manuscript collections and paper records are often generated in museum collecting. Therefore, interdisciplinary cooperation between archives and museums should be familiar dialogs. Sharing this information will result in improved scholarship.

Martha Green Hayes

Notes

¹Webster's New World Dictionary of the American Language. 2nd college ed., s.v. "record" and "document."

²James Deetz, In Small Things Forgotten: The Archaeology of American Life. (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1977). p. 24.

³Deetz, In Small Things, p. 160.

Further Reading in Material Culture

Fleming, E. McClung. "Artifact Study: A Proposed Model," Winterthur Portfolio 9, (1974).

Glassie, Henry. Patterns in Material Folk Culture of the Eastern United States. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1963.

Schlereth, Thomas J. Artifacts and the American Past. Nashville: American Association for State and Local History, 1980.

Washburn, Wilcomb E. "Manuscripts and Manufacts," American Archivist 27: 2 (1964).

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News Reels

Troupe County Historical Society in conjunction with La-Grange College has undertaken an ambitious archive and preservation project, which includes a million-dollar restoration plan to establish a three-story archival facility. An executive director is being hired to train and work with a staff of four professional and paraprofessionals supple-