
Archaeological Artefacts as Material Culture,
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It is rare to find a book which has been written with such an obvious love for the subject matter and where the excitement for particular materials and artefact classes frequently penetrates the comprehensive and skilfully woven academic synthesis of the history of artefact analysis and our current state of knowledge and practice. While the book covers all the topics which one would expect from an introductory text, the author's background in experimental studies gives this book its particular edge. For those of us involved in actualistic studies, i.e. experimental and ethnographic work, it is refreshing to see a book placing these forms of investigation so unapologetically alongside the more traditional forms of enquiry. Nor are the sensorial dimensions of artefacts forgotten — be it for the modern analyst or the ancient maker and user.

The book is divided into two almost independent parts. Part I deals with the theoretical and methodological underpinnings of artefact studies, while Part II is dedicated to a contextual discussion of different raw materials and resulting artefacts (organics, stone, clay, glass and metal).

Each topic is covered with meticulous thoroughness, whilst, at the same time, focusing on the main debates and honing in on core references without overloading the text.

Part I provides the intellectual backbone of this book. At the core of Hurcombe's approach is her firm belief that material culture is 'a set of social relationships between people and things, and above all it is a way of communicating as well as enabling' (p. 7). While not a new insight, it is much more than lip service to an existing paradigm and as such infuses every page of the book. More importantly, the author explicitly acknowledges that social meaning can reside in all stages of an object's life cycle (and not merely in its decorative elements) and attempts to expand on this in the second part.

Chapter 1 sets out key definitions (e.g. artefact, tool, function) and begins the reader's intellectual journey through a maze of important methodological issues, such as the use of classifications and typologies, biases encountered in different fieldwork settings, practices surrounding finds processing, finds analysis, illustrations, and creation of publications and displays. At every step, the reader is reminded that the human-material relationship does not stop with the discard or burial of the artefact, but actually extends into the present. Being governed as much by past social politics as by modern archaeological traditions, interpretations are inherently subjective and context-dependent. Investigations of the *chaîne opératoire*, object biographies or discard practices highlight various avenues that are open to archaeologists to make sense of this contextual information. Chapter 4 is entitled 'Making Sense of Artefacts' and tackles the thorny issue of how to analyse data in order to extract meaning. Issues covered include typologies, statistical analysis of finds, the use of ethnographic and ethnoarchaeological data, experimental archaeology and scientific analysis (with a detailed summary of different techniques in table 4.2). It is refreshing to see the primacy of scientific enquiry abandoned and replaced with a more balanced view that acknowledges the importance of actualistic studies. Part I concludes with an even-handed summary of the history of material culture studies and potential future directions. With issues such as animacy, agency and personhood highlighted, the lack of reference to sensorial approaches to materials, however, seems to be a surprising lacuna.

Some of the sensorial dimension is explored in the beginning of Part II, but is mainly brought to bear on function, rather than the experience of making or handling objects. This may just be a reflection of the *status quo* as the author reminds us: modern man is no longer *Homo faber*. Many of us are now removed from the manufacture of an object and have lost that ability to understand objects instinctively. The significance of experimental archaeology and ethnography is therefore further underlined.

The meat of Part II is contained in Chapters 7 through to 10 with detailed discussions of materials and artefacts made of organics, stone, clay, glass and metals. Function, properties and characteristics, analytical approaches and techniques are discussed for each material. A deliberate attempt is made to show up the social dimensions of each material's manufacture, use and discard, though this

becomes less successful the further one progresses through the chapters. Extensive (colour) illustrations accompany this section and bring to light the different qualities of each material — especially those depicting archaeological experiments. Again, the syntheses provided are extremely clear and list the most relevant references.

All in all, this book is packed with information which is clearly presented. Most importantly, it manages to get across the joys of working with material culture. Naturally, there are some points each of us could quibble with, but overall it is an innovative attempt to bring artefacts to life. Only one word of warning: while intended to serve as an introduction to material culture, the book structure, chapter layout and the densely written syntheses of, at times, very complex theoretical and practical concepts, make it more suitable for an intermediate level where basic concepts and approaches are already known, but need consolidating and enhancing.

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