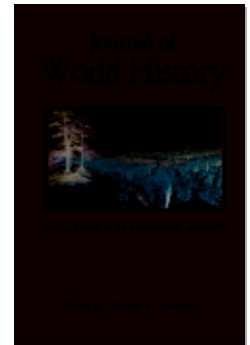




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*Writing Material Culture History* ed. by Anne Gerritsen and Giorgio Riello, and: *Global Trade and the Transformation of Consumer Cultures: The Material World Remade c. 1500–1820* by Beverly Lemire, and: *Silk, Slaves, and Stupas: Material Culture of the Silk Road* by Susan Whitfield (review)

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Journal of World History, Volume 31, Number 2, June 2020, pp. 456–463  
(Review)

Published by University of Hawai'i Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/jwh.2020.0015>

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and Hawai'i. The settlers of the Caroline Islands, according to J. Stephen Athens, constructed impressive monuments at Pohnpei and Kosrae due in large part to a stratified society. Rapa Nui, by contrast, exhibited its famous moai (statue of ancestors) without clear evidence of severe social stratification. Terry Hunt and Carl Lipo's essay "The Archaeology of Rapa Nui (Easter Island)" echoes their other published findings on the island, especially in rejecting Jared Diamond's well-known "collapse" theory: "There was no 'ecocide,' but a historically well-documented near-genocide following, and as a consequence of, European contacts" (p. 432). Patrick Kirch's chapter "The Prehistory of Hawai'i" offers a stunningly brief survey of his lifelong research on the northernmost Polynesian island chain, including coverage of the islanders' arrivals, agricultural innovations, material culture, and state formation. As argued elsewhere, Kirch sees an "archaic state" emerging from an earlier island chiefdom in the century prior to contact, concluding that "in Hawai'i the course of Polynesian cultural evolution entered uncharted realms" (p. 390). He admits that new research may ultimately reject his conclusion about the islands' state formation, and if so, he points to the promising work of young scholars "of Native Hawaiian ancestry" (p. 391). Indeed, at least one other author in the volume notes the "ethical and intellectual imperative" to train indigenous scholars and promote their work (p. 103).

These two volumes present world historians with a clear opportunity for comparative thinking in relation to the prehistory and colonial experiences of Pacific island societies. To the extent that Pacific islands seem geographically isolated and historically peripheral to the main currents of world history, they both confirm this should no longer be the case.

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*Writing Material Culture History.* Edited by ANNE GERRITSEN and GIORGIO RIELLO. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015. 338 pp.

*Global Trade and the Transformation of Consumer Cultures: The Material World Remade c. 1500–1820.* By BEVERLY LEMIRE. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018. 352 pp.

*Silk, Slaves, and Stupas: Material Culture of the Silk Road.* By SUSAN WHITFIELD. Oakland: University of California Press, 2018. 333 pp.

One definition of man (that is *homo sapiens*) is as a tool-user and an artifact-maker. While it may be the case that man is not the only species to do either of these things, it is certainly the case that these activities are something at which man excels over any other species yet revealed. This means that all of human history, not to mention the physical planet itself, is littered with the artifacts left by our ancestors, sometimes whole and *in situ*, sometimes in fragments and/or moved, and sometimes just in traces embedded in yet other artifacts—books, archival records, pictures—or even in the ephemera of stories passed down, story-telling being another of the most distinguishing features of the species. Yet despite the overwhelming abundance of material artifacts available for study, historians have been for much of their disciplinary history almost single-mindedly attentive to the stories rather than the stuff. Maybe indeed it is the very superfluity of the latter that has turned them off, the already curated traces being easier to manage? Whatever might be the reason for past neglect, however, the tide has now turned. The study of material culture is no longer at the fringes of history. It has joined the mainstream, and in many respects no more completely than in that other sub-discipline characterized by superfluity, world history.

The three books under consideration here all fit easily into the broad tent of global material culture history, even as they each reside in a very different corner of that tent. Anne Gerritsen and Giorgio Riello have brought together a collection of essays devoted to the multiple emerging methodologies associated with the study of material artifacts, interspersed with short case studies of particular objects, all especially suitable for undergraduate teaching and the training of future researchers. Susan Whitfield offers a primarily archeological window onto some of the (occasionally spectacularly beautiful and always mysterious) detritus left over the first millennium of the Common Era across the vast expanse traversed by the “silk road,” covering all of Central Asia and its extensions towards the east, west, and south. To the north lies territory that is mostly as inhospitable to artifacts as it is to humans. Finally, in the third book reviewed here Beverly Lemire offers us a theory of the making of the early modern world (i.e., a period roughly bookended by the Portuguese heading out to sea followed by their heir Columbus, and the Industrial Revolution which changed the global geographic balance of production and consumption in radically

new ways). Along the way, she also takes a deep dive into the complex histories of a number of globally traded commodities that in their own right profoundly altered the lives of (just about) every person on the planet. Together, these three books give us a very good read on the pulse of material culture history as we end the second decade of the twenty-first century. They demonstrate how far this field of inquiry has come in the relatively short time since the early salvos of the 1980s and 1990s; and they leave at least this reader thirsting for more.

I turn first to the collected essays in *Writing Material Culture History* as it is here where we can see most clearly the shape the field is taking as it matures. True to its opening promise, the book is indeed “a guide for students and teachers” (p. 1), one that can be read with coherence from beginning to end, but is also comfortably amenable to selective reading for classroom use. Gerritsen and Riello provide a thoughtful introduction to the volume as a whole and an even more substantive introduction to the complex theoretical issues of understanding material culture in a spatial framework in their essay on “Spaces of Global Interactions.” More about this essay follows, but suffice it to say for the moment that I found it so clear and insightful that I added it to my graduate historical methods seminar syllabus mid-semester shortly after reading it for this review. The volume as a whole though does not evidence an overall weighting towards theory. Indeed, it is the multiple short vignettes based on particular examples—the simply wonderful contribution by Flora Dennis on a sixteenth-century handbell is a scant 6 pages!—that make the underlying theoretical issues really come alive. What a careful consideration of beds might reveal about sleep quality in the past, or luminous objects might tell us about a kind of darkness that we can now barely imagine, to take but two examples, are suggestive of the many methodologies of analysis available to the thoughtful historian. There is much here that could also easily inspire students to try their hand at similar exercises.

To help manage the unusually high number of separate contributions—there are 25 chapters in total—the collection is divided into three thematic units: the “disciplines” of material culture; the “histories” of material culture; and the “presentation” of material culture. The first concerns itself primarily with the too-often vexed relationship between archeology and history, exploring in particular how historians have utilized (or not) material artifacts to further their understanding of the past, one primarily formed while working with their more traditionally comfortable materials and texts. Not surprisingly, there is a strong desire in this section to see material artifacts given their full due. Rather than being second-class citizens in

the arsenal of discovery, objects should serve as the legitimate complements to documents as Suzanne Findlen Hood argues persuasively in her analysis of broken ceramics, an easily enough demeaned category of material artifacts, although an abundant one to be sure. And in a wonderful twist from the usual order of things, Catherine Richardson in her essay on “Written Texts and the Performance of Materiality” argues that we might even draw upon the written word to help us more fully understand the world of things. Using the invocation of Yorick’s skull in *Hamlet* as her example, she reminds us of the many ways in which “language conjures things into being” (p. 56).

The section on the presentation of material culture, as its title suggests, explores the various ways in which material artifacts are preserved, conserved, hidden or displayed, made available for physical inspection or not, or even made visible yet still immaterial via presentation in the digital space. The history discipline does not have a particularly distinguished record of valuing museum curatorial work as a scholarly enterprise in its own right, although this seems to be changing along with the rise of a more widely shared interest in material culture studies. But for the general public, very few of whom will ever read a history monograph, a wander among museum display cases or even more likely watching a televised program about some object of past manufacture and its use, are going to form the core of their post-secondary history education. Museum practice then is critical, not just for the antiquarian goal of keeping the physical heritage of the past safe for the future, but for what it says about the issues that are important to historians: for understanding how people make meaning in their lives, and how they connect with other people in the process of doing so. The essays in this section suggest a number of ways forward to better align the enterprise of historians with that of curation. From the return of the *wunderkammer* to reflections on costume drama and period movies, there is much of value here for all who study history, not just those pursuing museum studies or public history more broadly.

I turn finally to the section dedicated to the histories of material culture. The opening chapter is the already mentioned essay by Gerritsen and Riello, which serves in many respects as an anchor for the entire book. They explore, and then “map” (in a very helpful schematic table) the multivalent connections between the spaces of creation, with those of imagination, negotiation, and reinterpretation. They demonstrate via examples the fact that objects can change physically along with their movement across space; they are sometimes transformed by additions, deletions, or new decoration. All of this

change in space and form then allows, nay ensures, that the imaginary space that the objects inspire will be altered as well. It is the job of the historian to recover those multiple imaginary spaces, and they demonstrate with elegance how it can be done. In their words, “a teacup made in China created its own world of ideas, its own associations with the drinking of another Asian commodity such as tea, its own pleasure in the translucent nature of the material, . . . ” (p. 112).

It is not just space that can be reconceptualized in this way, however. Other chapters in this section address the history of emotions, or of sleeping, or of hearing and seeing. These ephemera are not the usual subjects of historical inquiry, but they nonetheless form a critical part of our own human experience. How can historians hope to capture the aspects of life that are subjective and fleeting, often enough even to ourselves? I’ve already noted Dennis’ compelling study of a handbell as a way to understand the projection of authority via sound. Sandra Cavallo documents what she tells us was a new Renaissance concern with sleep as essential to wellness, as she follows the transition of the bed from an object of “sociability” to one “exclusively for resting” (p. 144). Or consider the essay by John Styles, which charts a path into the nature of maternal affection through careful study of the London Foundling Hospital tokens in conjunction with the formal archives of the same. As he notes, there is great value for the historian in consulting “words and things in combination” (p. 168).

Each of the examples brought together by Gerritsen and Riello reminds us that sometimes the objects of the past really can tell the stories that people at the time did not think were important enough to tell themselves. In many respects, this is precisely the enterprise of Susan Whitfield’s book, *Silk, Slaves, and Stupas: Material Culture of the Silk Road*. In a series of ten chapters, each dedicated to a particular object of archeological interest (well, actually nine objects plus a chapter dedicated to “The Unknown Slave”) Whitfield tries to trace the full life cycle of the object to the present. She ranges far and wide across both space and time to uncover the secrets of her object’s origin, intended first use, transport, transformation, and eventual burial, whether accidental or intentional. Her objects include jewelry, dishwares and plaques, textiles, coins, a very rare book, and even an architectural religious monument. In each case she dissects the materials of fabrication, the source and extent of relevant commodity chains for both raw materials and finished goods, the chronology of technological development, use, loss, and in time rediscovery. A truly outstanding feature of the book is the series of maps that make spatial sense of a world mostly lost to even historically informed readers in the

contemporary West. With the maps as a guide, the reader can follow not just the trail of any one of her objects, but the crossings they made with each other in an earlier age. The level of detailed evidence that she unearths (literally it often seems even if she is not the one with a shovel in her hand) is both impressive and enticing, despite the fact that plenty of missing evidence remains. Critical parts of these stories require speculation out of necessity. Nevertheless, she is a great storyteller, and the objects come alive under her ministrations; all that is but the unknown slave, a figure that never quite materializes in a chapter that left this reader frustrated. Maybe this is how it should be though given the concomitant ubiquity and invisibility of slaves in the places and times covered by her inquiry. But in a book that is most effective in providing what we might think of as the building blocks of history, rather than in doing history itself—there is no line of argument put forth for example—the chapter on the unknown slave is the one that suffers from this imbalance the most.

Finally, I turn my attention to Beverly Lemire and her fascinating book, *Global Trade and the Transformation of Consumer Cultures: The Material World Remade c. 1500–1820*. Here we find a deeply compelling historical argument about the making of the Early Modern global world coupled with a dizzying display of spatial, material, economic, and behavioral detail to satisfy even the most committed lover of objects for their own sakes. Lemire knows her stuff, as well as the museums where the stuff can be found, and the literature in which the stuff has been pawed over already. Her writing is elegant and engaging; her examples range from the truly obscure (giving this reader plenty of new “facts” to take note of for teaching and thinking) to the well-known, but with her own special attention to what others may have missed about them. Lemire has already had a long and distinguished career as a pioneer in material culture history, but this book is a *tour de force*. I had trouble putting it down.

She begins by reminding us of what we should already know but so easily fail to practice. “A Eurocentric perspective distorts the histories of past centuries and the complexities of global events,” she says, wanting to offer instead a “revision” to such “powerful essentialist views” (p. 5). In her work she makes a recurring theme of the “agency of subject peoples” (p. 10), not because they are more important than those who subjugate them, but simply because all people have agency which will find expression in some way or another regardless of their level of political or economic power. It is precisely a key benefit of studying material culture, to find the traces of expressed agency in the ordinary objects of everyday life, in the very things that the powerful

are likely to overlook. Armed with this commitment, and a set of tools for analysis—most especially the “industrious revolution” concept borrowed from the work of Jan de Vries,<sup>1</sup> which she employs as a “valuable comparative template” (p. 28)—Lemire turns her focus to the stuff itself.

Given her own area of research specialization in cotton—both the raw commodity and as made up in finished goods—it is no surprise that she begins her tour of global consumption patterns with fabrics and furs. These were the most frequently traded goods of the early modern world, and probably the most malleable as well. No aspect of the textile trade—from commodity preparation to texture, cut, surface design, or method of construction, on to transport, regulation, and even reuse—is lost to her inspection. Each stage of the decision-making process, as revealed by the final objects and the things people have said about them, offers something for the historian to consider. And not just with textiles, but with dyestuffs, exotic groceries, eating utensils, tobacco, and so on. Her capacious historical imagination really shines in the final chapter of the book that she dedicates to an exploration of stitching as a global art. The exquisite, yet rarely studied, floral embroidery of the Wendat people (Huron, now centered within the geographic confines of Quebec) that flourished from the 1770s into the nineteenth century, makes a perfect coda for her argument about adoption and adaptation across vast distances and between seemingly isolated cultures. Women of vastly different societies were similarly encouraged “to write with their needles” (p. 250). That they so often did in the common language of Asian floral patterns is no less remarkable than that the many expressions of those patterns remain nonetheless distinctive. As much as there is to learn about assertions of agency by the powerless from her investigation into shipwrecks and scavenging along every global coast that fronted a trade corridor, the capacity for voice embedded in the simple act of embroidery seems somehow even more revelatory. Bringing a native community into full participation in the global history of consumption, well beyond just the beaver pelt and the poisonous desire it sparked, is for this reviewer the greatest gift of this truly wonderful book.

As all three of these books make clear, this is an exciting time to be working on the history of material culture. We know so much more than we did just a few decades ago, especially about the “people without

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<sup>1</sup> Jan de Vries, *The Industrious Revolution: Consumer Behavior and the Household Economy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

history” to borrow a book title.<sup>2</sup> Yet, there remains much still to discover. Some of it undoubtedly still lies under the ground. But it is also certainly the case that some of it is staring us right in the face. Work such as that highlighted here should inspire us all to look more creatively.

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*Europeans Abroad, 1450–1750.* By DAVID RINGROSE. Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2018. 286 pp.

*Empires of the Weak: The Real Story of European Expansion and the Creation of the New World Order.* By J. C. SHARMAN. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019. 196 pp.

In recent decades world historians and specialists in premodern Asian, African, and American history have produced a rich body of literature undermining the prevailing assumptions and orthodoxies of the field traditionally known as “the Age of European Expansion.” These scholars eschew the Eurocentric perception that intrepid, enterprising early modern European sailors and soldiers sailed to unknown seas, forced open trade routes to European commerce using superior weaponry—gunpowder, improved ships, and steel—and created a global trade network and a set of European empires that by the nineteenth century had set the stage for Western global hegemony. A prevalent explanation for this “rise of Europe” is that Europe underwent a “military revolution” in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Europe developed not only innovative weaponry and tactics, but also a cultural dynamic, shaped by rivalries among European states that forced Europeans to learn, adapt, and improve their military and economic strategies and institutions at a quicker pace than other societies in Asia, Africa, or the New World. Thus, Europe was able, as Philip T. Hoffman puts it in *Why Did Europeans Conquer the World?* (2015), to become the dominant world power despite its lower population, smaller economy, and weaker institutions compared to many other polities in the premodern world.

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<sup>2</sup> Eric Wolf, *Europe and the People Without History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982).