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Giorgio Riello

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The “Material Turn” in World and Global History*

GIORGIO RIELLO

This article charts the confluence and eventual overlap between two different fields: that of world/global history and that of material culture. At a basic level, world and global historians’ interest in “things” is the result of the fact that material artefacts—whether commodities, luxuries, scientific tools, ethnographic specimens or unique art objects—have been seen as mobile as than people. Yet, the so-called “material turn” in world/global history also raises a series of methodological and theoretical questions. I start with a historiographic overview to map the major currents and areas of global history affected by a “material turn.” Moving from a historiographical to a conceptual plane, the main body of this article is dedicated to showing how material culture might come to the assistance of world/global history. It provides a series of methodological and theoretical tools for historians to play with established narratives and to revise the conceptualization of connectivity—a key concept in global history. I conclude with some reflections on how a material approach might relate to recent forays into what is now called global microhistory, addressing issues of agency and the relationship between academic and public history.

KEYWORDS: early modern, material culture, global exchange, arts, consumption, connections.

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When one talks about “turns” there is a risk of overemphasizing change. This is why the “cultural turn” and the “linguistic turn” in history have been cut back to size, especially after losing their novel appeal.1 The 90-degree change of direction of a “turn” is not quite appropriate for a field such as global history, whose contours, agenda, and methodologies have yet to find a clear definition. This article charts instead the confluence and eventual overlap between two different fields: that of global history and that of material culture. “Material” is here used as a shorthand for a variety of different topics: the interest in commodities, luxuries, and artefacts as well as what is broadly called material culture. Examples of the marriage between global history and materiality and the role that things and their meaning have played in the past couple of decades in global history are extensive. There is now a sufficiently large body of scholarship to allow us to see established as well as emerging trends, themes, and indeed problems.2

This article is divided into four parts: a historiographic overview mapping the major currents and areas of global history affected by a “material turn,” followed by a consideration of how material culture might help revise established analytical frameworks in global history. Moving to a conceptual plane, the main body of this article is dedicated to how material culture might come to the assistance of global historians by providing a series of tools to reconceptualize what we might call the “spaces of the global” and in particular the meaning of connectivity—a key concept in global history. I conclude with some reflections on how a material approach might relate to recent forays into what is now called global microhistory, addressing issues of agency, and the relationship between academic and public history.

**Material Culture and Global History: The History of a Marriage**

If one looks at the existing publications that combine material culture and global history, one is struck by the fact that material culture approaches comprise a greater portion of global history works on the early modern period (ca. 1400–1800) than on the modern

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2 The relationship between material histories and histories of global trade and consumption is well studied. New material methodologies are applied to study indigeneity, power, as well as to approach histories of emotions and the senses on a global scale.
period. One of the reasons might be that unlike the nineteenth and twentieth centuries for which abundant diplomatic, imperial, and institutional sources exist, the early modern period—and most especially the period pre-1600—lacks the same richness. We are left instead with a variety of material artefacts—often to be seen in museums—that have been taken as examples of the connectivity that characterized the early modern world. These include priceless as well as ordinary cotton and silk cloth produced in China and India and traded across Eurasia and beyond; silver and gold artefacts made of metals mined in the Americas; Chinese, Japanese, and East Asian porcelain excavated in places as different as Italy and Mexico; emeralds, diamonds, and pearls from Asia and the Americas and ivories from South Asia and Africa; glass; lacquered objects; Japanese screens; maps and paintings; dyeing substances; feather capes and turbans; seal, beaver, and fish skins; elephants, tigers, and turkeys; foodstuffs such as sugar, cocoa, and tea; intoxicants such as opium and tobacco; intermediate products such as indigo and exotic woods; scientific instruments, shells, works of art and curios; instruments of torture and slavery. The list could continue but the point here is that the history of material culture is not simply an engagement with a random selection of things. It brings to the fore important methodological and theoretical questions for both the wider field of history and for global history in particular.

At a very basic level, historians’ interest in “things” is the result of the fact that material artefacts, whether commodities, luxuries, scientific tools, ethnographic specimens, or unique art objects, have been seen as mobile—even more than people. In an age before mass migration and fast travel, and when knowledge of the world—from whatever location—was partial at best, things did not just move across vast geographies and continents, but also came to embody “otherness”: the unknown, the different, and what is often inaccurately called “the exotic.” Scholars and broadcasters have taken material artefacts as a way to explain but also illustrate the connectivity of what has been called “the first global age.” Things that moved, “nomadic objects,” “peripatetic objects,” “material circulation,” “commodities,” “exogenous objects,” “frontier objects,” and “global things” have been given

pride of place in narratives that over the past years have developed a conceptual apparatus that includes terms such as “contact,” “entanglement,” first and second “encounter,” “hybridity,” “translation,” “negotiation,” “reciprocity,” “intermediation,” “adaptation”—all used as key concepts in connected histories of premodern globalization. In recent times the more politically-loaded concepts of “appropriation,” “asymmetry,” “incommensurability,” “separation,” “dissent,” and “conflict” have also been fruitfully deployed in material narratives of global history.

The interest in things and material culture in history precedes the more recent engagement by global historians. In fact one might say that global history has capitalized on a longstanding appreciation of materiality and material culture by disciplines such as anthropology and ethnography in what today are called material culture studies.

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Historians expressed a more limited interest in objects. Up until a generation ago “past things” were of interest to specific subfields of history—often under-represented in academia—such as the history of dress, textiles, furniture, design history, and the history of technology. The history of consumption has been one of the areas that have most contributed to a material turn, eventually affecting also global history. Since the 1980s, historians have extended their research in what Fernand Braudel called the “material life” of early modern Europeans. Work on inventories, wills, and notarial archives, as well as letters, accounts, and bankruptcy records has shown the importance of material artefacts in people’s lives. Originally framed within rigid national boundaries or focusing on specific locales, the history of consumption in Europe was important for its wider discussion of labor, the agency of people, as well as discussions on taste and comfort in the eighteenth century or power and splendor in the Renaissance.

The art historian and sinologist Craig Clunas writing in 1999 in the pages of The American Historical Review observed the irony created by “the contrast between the constantly repeated global metaphor of a ‘world’ of goods and the rigorously localized context in which the discussion takes place.” He claimed that to focus solely on Europe ignored wider scholarly trends that considered consumption in areas as different as China, Japan, the Ottoman Empire, and the Americas, therefore linking consumption to narratives of (European) modernization. More than twenty years after Clunas’ article, one can appreciate the fact that studies of consumption have been delocalized. An example might be this beautiful printed cotton cloth (Figure 1) in the collection of the Victoria and Albert Museum in London. A generation ago, this embroidered cotton cloth with silk yarn dated circa 1700 would have been appreciated for its decorative function as a bed

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hanging in the now demolished country house of Ashburnham Place in Sussex in the south of England. Today the same textile is better appreciated as an example of the types of Asian goods that in the late seventeenth century were fashionable in England and elsewhere in Europe. Beverly Lemire and John Styles have considered the processes,
chronologies, and mechanisms through which textiles such as chintzes, calicoes, and other printed and embroidered textiles came to be part of the domestic and fashion culture of premodern consumers in Europe.12 They have used artefacts in their analysis of consuming patterns and have underlined how European consumers enjoyed a variety of goods imported from Asia and the Americas. This scholarship has been complemented by equally important quantitative work. Anne McCants, for instance, in her analysis of Dutch orphans’ inventories, shows how Chinese and Japanese porcelain and Indian printed calicoes were owned not just by the social elites but also by the middling classes and more modest Dutch artisans.13

The same bed hangings can be taken today as an example not of the consumption of Asian things, but of the trade of “global commodities,” goods that were exchanged in this case from north-west India to England especially by the European East India companies.14 In my own scholarship on cotton textiles, I point to the fact that more than half of all goods imported into Europe by the European East India companies in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries were silk and cotton textiles.15 Most of what was imported was not as beautiful as these hangings; yet the trade that in the early modern period crisscrossed different continents had a material repercussion not just on patterns of consumption but also on exchange and production, inspiring imitation and fostering technological change.16 Material goods created connectivity as they put into contact and shaped symbiotic relationships between areas of the world that previously had been either

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14 Berg et al., eds, *Goods from the East*.


disconnected or not in direct contact. The case of textiles shows that this was not just a relationship between the manufacturing power-houses of Asia (China and India) and Europe but extended to Southeast Asia and the Atlantic.

Beyond textiles, the trade from the Americas of produce and foodstuffs and drugs (cocoa, coffee, and sugar), often transplanted from Eurasia and reshaped into plantation production through the use of slave labor, adds a further important dimension and connects what Jan de Vries has indicated as the Atlantic and the Asian sides of premodern world trade. The history of trade and economic history have been dealing with commodities for a long time. The exchange of luxuries such as large-size chintzes would have not been possible without the trade of silver that connected the mines of Potosí in Latin America, the financial institutions of Europe, and the demand for precious metal in India and most especially China. Scholarship on the global histories of raw cotton, dyes such as indigo and cochineal, foodstuffs such as cod, and precious materials such as ivory have expanded Braudel’s “wheels of commerce” well beyond Europe and the Mediterranean.
economic history approaches that focused on the quantification of general categories of “traded goods” are now complemented by material-culture inflected studies that consider what was traded also from a material point of view, taking into account issues such as quality, variety, productive skills, as well as storing, merchandising, and retail.

From Sydney Mintz to Marcy Norton, scholarship has gone beyond classic economic narratives by considering the political, and cultural dimensions of production, exchange, and consumption. This is the case of the smoking of tobacco, whose story as a commodity to this day cannot be told without considering its cultural connotations in the Americas, its opposition in Europe, Russia, and China, and its eventual acceptance as part of new social practices in most of the world. These works also point to a new sensibility among historians that requires commodities to be considered beyond their European remit of circulation. While the existing literature still underlines the centrality of Europe in early modern global trade and in the processes of early modern globalization, the role of other areas of the world, the importance of localized production, and the complexity of multilateral exchange bring a wider lens to the history of premodern material global history.

The engagement with unique objects and expensive luxuries has also pushed the agenda beyond established narratives. Rather than charting the ways in which material goods were commodified by global forces and most especially by European motivations, recent scholarship has focused on material things that did not enter into market systems and did not necessarily participate in the shaping of world economies. This is illustrated in the work on the many ambassadorial gifts


exchanged between European states but also between European and non-European powers.\textsuperscript{26} This scholarship draws from a now vast literature on “global art” that sits at the intersection between museum studies and art history, and which has offered a number of important theoretical and historical analyses on “transcultural” artistic (two-dimensional drawings, prints, and paintings and three-dimensional sculptures, artefacts, and architectures) exchanges especially within Eurasia and more recently also between Eurasia, Africa, and the Americas.\textsuperscript{27} Works on “luxury objects” have also highlighted the political, labor, and environmental aspects of global material fluxes, as for instance in recent works on pearls and on gems.\textsuperscript{28}

The characterization of the encounter between two fields, that of global history and that of material culture, is inaccurate also for another reason. As global history has evolved to include topics and problems that were previously treated within local, national, and continental area perspectives, so “the material” has been mobilized accordingly. The history of science, for instance, has adopted a global approach in considering transfers of knowledge through codified texts, embodied in


people, but also “materialized” in things. This includes the artisanal practices that in the vast space of later medieval Eurasia brought into being knowledge systems for instance on materials such as mercury and sulfur.  

Similarly, in Europe the collecting of plants, minerals, animals as well as ethnographic objects from different parts of the world had paramount importance in “producing” new knowledge from the fifteenth century onwards. Artefacts created systems of knowledge, challenged established normative structures, and stimulated visual, tactile, and olfactory imagination through the collecting of beautiful naturalia and artificialia as well as the rare, the arcane, the simply bizarre.

A similar trajectory of transformation can be observed for histories of dress and fashion that had long centered on Europe. The survival of sometimes fragile dress and textile items in many Western museum collections dating back at least to the European middle ages has long been coupled with theoretical and historiographical explanations on the unicity of Western fashion. While most people in the world—present and past—wear some form of clothing, scholars distinguished fashion from costume and attributed to the latter unchanging characteristics that often served to present the non-European world not just as fixed in time but also a-historical. New material culture methodologies and a broader appreciation for non-European dress has revised these narratives showing the importance of fashion in areas of the world as different as premodern Japan, Tang to Qing China, and


Colonial Latin America. Central to this change of interpretation has been the questioning of the universalization of (European) categories of analysis. Similarly the history of food is no longer interested solely in local dietary cultures but—even in a context in which material evidence is ephemeral—it constructs global analyses through the lens of specific foodstuffs such as tomatoes, potatoes, rice, and pineapples. The material acts as a bridge to reflect on wider historiographical and historical problems as for instance in the case of slavery by questioning established narratives of subordination of the slave body through the analysis of the clothing worn or the food eaten by enslaved people. Finally, an emerging literature on the politics of things has adopted post-colonial theory and methods to address issues of indigeneity, race, and identity as for instance in recent studies of the European infiltration into the Pacific Ocean and Atlantic America especially in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

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This brief excursus is anything but comprehensive: a material perspective informs a variety of themes some of which have been “globalized” also thanks to a focus on material culture. In doing so, however, new problems have emerged. First is the above-mentioned “Euro-centered” perspective of much scholarship on global material culture. If artefacts and material culture methodologies are to be useful to global history, so the imbalance caused by the fact that most of the existing scholarship discusses “global things” that either come to Europe, come from Europe, or at least pass through Europe has to be addressed.  

This is no surprise because the documentation that allows historians to make sense of what otherwise might be a “de-contextualized” object, is more often than not produced by European institutions and individuals in layered processes over centuries. The rich literature on the European East India companies, the extensive archives detailing their trade in a variety of commodities and luxuries, and the survival of extant examples such as printed calicoes in museums as seen in Figure 1 have focused the attention of material culture histories on the maritime connection between Europe and Asia and on the manufactured objects exchanged within this space of connectivity. Scholars need to be aware of underlying assumptions and cataloguing criteria that structured collections as the accumulation of studies unwittingly leads to the reinforcing of traditional views on the centrality of Europe in global connectivity, something that is as unfortunate as it is incorrect especially the more one goes back in time.

The second issue that recent scholarship on global material culture reveals is a certain methodological tension, perhaps even eclecticism. There is a tendency for creating global narratives driven by the thrust of one object or commodity (cotton, ivory, salt, silver, emeralds, etc.). Yet more rarely these specific things become entry points through which to reflect on the type of global history that is narrated. In this sense, there

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is no single “material culture” but a variety of different material histories. When Anne Gerritsen and I paraphrased Appadurai’s “social life of things” into a “global lives of things,” we acknowledged a plurality of situations under the banner of the “global.” At the same time, we were aware that while Appadurai saw his “social life” as an approach or a lens (for instance in processes of commodification), our “global lives” expressed instead a condition similar to that of individuals who moved across intercontinental geographies. There is now much more of a need to reflect on the methodological implications of using material “things” and how their global lives might become a way of analyzing and of shaping global history, points to which I will return in the second part of this article.

A final observation relates instead to what I call the “backlash against global history.” Jeremy Adelman’s self-critique of the field and the rebuke by Drayton and Motadel have made us aware that global history and global material culture prioritize the cosmopolitan over the provincial, the mobile over the static, and might reproduce global historians’ liberal ideologies. Material culture belongs to a type of global history that engages with mobility and movement, but is oblivious to so-called “small spaces,” of the specificity of contexts, in works that—as John-Paul Ghobrial noted—“prioritize the movement of global historical phenomena over the explanation of their occurrence in particular contexts.” By doing so, global history becomes exclusionary, surely of those who did not move, who did not trade, or did not consume commodities and luxuries produced elsewhere in the world.

My aim in the rest of this article is to reflect on the ways in which a material approach might further develop the methodologies of global history. I single out three areas that have been at the center of global historians’ attention in recent years. First, I ask how material artefacts might help us to revise established narratives in history, further developing global history’s critical stance. Second, at a methodological level I consider the ways in which things help us address the relationship between the global and the local in global history. Finally, at a theoretical level, I ask what role artefacts and commodities might play in what is now called “global-micro” history.

THINGS AND THE REVISING OF (META)NARRATIVES

Material culture has been successfully used as a methodological tool as much as a historical topic. One can consider the role that material things had in history (at a local, national or global scale) but also use material things to critique, revise, or recontextualize established narratives. The ability of artefacts to raise open questions is one of their attributes that should not be underestimated. I wish here to consider how material culture can revise historical narratives that range from Alfred Crosby’s “Columbian exchange,” to the New History of Diplomacy, to Kenneth Pomeranz’s “Great Divergence.”

The so-called Columbian exchange was a concept minted in the early 1970s. Historian Alfred Crosby saw the arrival of Europeans in the Americas not as a major political or even economic turning point, but as a moment of profound environmental and biological restructuring due to the transfer of plants, animals, and diseases across continents. Students are presented with a map that charts the transfer of American tomatoes and potatoes to Europe and the opposite transfer of bananas, onions, livestock, and a range of illnesses to the Americas. The Columbian exchange was eventually broadened to include technologies, human populations, and ideas. Take however a screen—a masterpiece at the Art Institute of Chicago: it was created in 1625–1675 and its make, golden background, stylistic motifs, and materials make it a distinctively Japanese artefact (Figure 2). It was not destined to export (as was the case of the so-called “Nanban” screens purchased by Portuguese traders) but for domestic consumption by the military class, the aristocracy, and wealthy merchants. Yet this “local” artefact is a useful tool for us to reflect not just on the artist’s choices and the patron’s aesthetic and material preferences, but more widely on the nature of the Columbian exchange. It represents two plants: cockscombs that is native to Japan and maize that was instead imported by the Portuguese after their arrival in Japan in 1543. The artist was keen to expand his repertoire to include new and exotic subjects, in this case a crop like maize that came from the Americas.

Focusing on the remit of the Columbian exchange beyond Europe, this artefact stands as a testimony of the ways in which maize spread to East Asia, an aspect not considered by Crosby in his original formulation. By the time the screen was produced maize had been cultivated in Japan for possibly half a century. In Japan as in China and

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Europe, maize came to change the agrarian landscape. Yet the artist’s decision to combine the domestic and foreign with the curled alien maize lazily bent over the bright red stalks of the native cockscombs tells us of the implications of new crops beyond their agrarian and nutritional histories: how they influenced societies and how they assumed new cultural characteristics. This screen—beyond the beauty of the object itself—is a rethinking of the Columbian exchange in terms of new geographies and according to less functional parameters than Crosby had originally intended.

Material culture approaches have profoundly reshaped also established fields such as diplomatic history. Until a couple of decades ago, the history of diplomacy was dominated by high politics, the decisions of rules, and the impact of treatises and wars. The rise of New Diplomatic History has brought forward at least two sets of new concerns: first, an appreciation that cultural practices in diplomacy—as for instance in the strict protocol of premodern embassies—were not simple manifestations of higher principles or political ideas but were instead constitutive of diplomacy itself. Second, traditional narratives based on the professionalization of diplomacy—as for instance with the creation of permanent embassies by European powers—became untenable. Sources showed the rich diplomatic

**Figure 2.** Japanese “Maize and Cockscombs” six-panel screen, mid-seventeenth century. Ink, color, and gold on paper. 170.2 × 357 cm. Source: Art Institute of Chicago, Kate S. Buckingham Endowment, 1959.599. Artokoloro/Alamy Foto Stock 2A2K1RN.
cultures of principalities, kingdoms, and empires in Asia, Africa, and the Americas in premodern times.\footnote{Global Gifts, ed. Biedermann, Gerritsen, and Riello, esp. introduction.}

Material culture has been used to investigate long-distance diplomacy as well as local negotiating skills: splendid gifts were a must in ruler-to-ruler relationships and are taken as tools by historians to understand unspoken assumptions, differences in attitudes, and strategies in cross-cultural mediation. They can also help us to revise common-held understandings that tend to privilege Europe. This is the case for animals, one of the most common types of gifts in premodern state-to-state diplomacy. Historians of the middle ages are well acquainted with Abul-Abbas, the Asian elephant that the Abbasid caliph Harun al-Rashid—“king of the Persians” as contemporary sources explained—“gifted” to Charlemagne in 802 C.E.\footnote{Giuseppe Albertoni, L’elefante di Carlo Magno (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2020).} This elephant was not quite a gift but a request from the Christian emperor.\footnote{Doris Behrens-Abouseif, Practicing Diplomacy in the Mamluk Sultanate: Gifts and Material Culture in the Medieval Islamic World (London: I.B. Tauris, 2016), 114. See also Angelica Groom, Exotic Animals in the Art and Culture of the Medici Court in Florence (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2019), and more widely on Florence global material culture, Lia Markey, Imagining the Americas in Medici Florence (Pennsylvania, PA: Penn State University Press, 2016).} Exotic animals had political meaning and associated their holders to past rulers who had had a similar privilege. This was also the case for the giraffe that the ruler of Florence, Lorenzo de Medici, received as a gift from Sultan Qāʾitbāy (ca. 1416–1496) of Egypt in 1487. The animal was sent in the hope of enticing the support of Florence against the Ottoman Empire.\footnote{Angelica Groom, Exotic Animals in the Art and Culture of the Medici Court in Florence (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2019), and more widely on Florence global material culture, Lia Markey, Imagining the Americas in Medici Florence (Pennsylvania, PA: Penn State University Press, 2016).} Lorenzo was well aware of its rarity and most probably knew that since antiquity only one other giraffe had reached Europe in 1261. This is why the animal was paraded around Florence and subsequently represented in several frescoes. Yet a focus on the giraffe allows us to see how this animal might have been unique in Europe but was not as unique as Lorenzo de Medici and his Florentine subjects might have thought. The rulers of Egypt had been sending giraffes as diplomatic gifts for centuries. Sultan an-Nasir Muhammad (r. 1299–1341) sent giraffes to both the Artukid ruler of Mardin in Anatolia and the sultan of Morocco. A couple of generations later in 1404 the Mamluk sultan of Egypt, al-Nasir Faraj (r. 1399–1412) sent a giraffe to Tamerlane (r. 1370–1405) then resident in the city of Khoy in northwestern Iran: “This animal has a body as big as a horse but with an extremely long neck. Its forelegs are very much longer than the hind legs, and its hoofs are divided like those of cattle,” we are told by the
Spaniard Ruy Gonzalez de Clavijo in his colorful account of the embassy which at the same time also payed homage to Tamerlane. Clavijo’s report kindled the European imagination of this near mythical animal well before a specimen reached Florence eighty years later. The giraffe alerts us to the wide diplomatic circuits of North Africa and Central Asia in which Italy was marginal at best. Europe was not always at the forefront of such processes and might be said to have lagged behind great empires such as Ming China and the rising new Islamic empires of the Ottomans, Mughals, and Safavids. Tamerlane’s gift also alerts us to the fact that written and visual sources have to supplement material culture methodologies especially when objects—as in the case of living animals—did not survive long. Literary works such as Clavijo’s testimony have to be integrated with visual accounts as in the case of the beautiful miniature from Zafarnama commissioned by the Timurid prince Ibrahim Sultan to recount the exploits of his grandfather Tamerlane (Figure 3).

In the early 2000s, economic history was one of the first fields of history to be affected by new global concerns. Its social-science methodologies and the importance of international and comparative methodologies made it a suitable candidate to “go global.” Interestingly, global approaches were not readily accepted in analyses of the nineteenth- and twentieth-century international economy, but came to dominate the classic industrial revolution debates. Kenneth Pomeranz’s Great Divergence produced a new “metanarrative” that compared and contrasted North-west Europe’s industrialization with the Yangtze Delta’s path of economic development. Pomeranz’s ecologic, resource-based, and fully macro approach focused on factors and conditions rather than delving into processes. It adopted a static comparative framework in line with classic economic theory and, by necessity, did not consider the trajectories of individual sectors, the stories of specific products, or the actions of particular individuals.47

Global historians have struggled not so much—as it is often said—to overcome macro or metanarratives. Rather their main impediment has been how to enmesh explanations that are both large and small and that deal with the specific as well as the general. Pomeranz’s comparison à deux has been supplemented and nuanced; most of global economic history knows how to distinguish the tree from the forest and what “to leave out” (to borrow William McNeill’s expression) but as a consequence sacrifices the detail for the bigger picture. My contention here is that in doing so, the fine grain has been lost in terms of nuance and, most especially, in the quest for challenging and revising established truisms.

Can material culture help? Two problems are immediately apparent: first, the fact that while global narratives tend to encompass entire continents and large swathes of time, “things” are most often than not “punctuated” in time and space. Take this box made in France in the mid-eighteenth century and used for holding snuff (Figure 4). Its lustrous red color was produced by using a technique called *vernis Martin*, a form of japanning that imitated lacquer and a process that was perfected by the Parisian Martin brothers who in 1733 received the right to a royal privilege from Louis XV of France. At face value, this object has little to say about global history and the great divergence. Decorative art scholarship has classified and studied the Martin brothers’ production and attributed to them pieces admired in many

![Figure 4. Box, made in France, 1740–1770. Mâché decorated with japanning (imitation lacquer); chased and gilded metal hinge and fastening. Source: Williams Hearn Gift. Victoria and Albert Museum W.44&A-1923.](image)

design and art museums internationally. Such scholarship noted that the vernis Martin and other similar types of japanning—as the name suggests—was produced in imitation of artefacts reaching Europe from Japan—as well as China and India—from the seventeenth century onwards. Repeated attempts were made to reproduce the shiny effect of lacquer, eventually creating a varnish by heating oil and copal and adding Venetian turpentine.

Historian Maxine Berg noted the importance of Asian luxuries in Europe. These included not just lacquer, but also cotton and silk textiles, and porcelain whose production in Europe emerged in the course of the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries as a form of substitution of Asian goods. John Styles similarly has showed how imitation, transposition across materials, and adaptation of goods to European taste became a major force for technological change in many British manufacturing sectors. Beverly Lemire’s work on cotton textiles has explained that this might have entailed the creation of new productive processes as well as attempts at mastering original Asian techniques. By using artefacts, the narratives of divergence and European industrialization have been revised to show the profound connection that existed between technological (and even scientific) renewal in Europe and the global trade of goods. While the metanarrative of the great divergence might remain unscathed, material culture approaches have provided a great deal of evidence on the exact mechanisms that led Europe on a different technological, innovation, and ultimately economic path compared to East Asia. They have also connected manufacturing, trade, and consumption and have shown how connections across the world are as important a lens for narrating global change as comparative methodologies.

These three examples of the possible ways in which material culture can help revise and extend established historical interpretations, alert us also to the limitations of the field of material culture history at the intersection with global and world histories. First, one has to note a disjuncture between histories of trade and those of material culture.


While it is undeniable that there is an overlap between traded items and material culture, the two do not coincide: many goods that were traded across the early modern world are not fully considered by material culture methodologies. This is especially the case—as for instance with bulk goods—where little or no material evidence survives to document sometimes-important trade fluxes. Conversely, material culture history has taken a broader view of “movement” that includes not just trade and exchange but also gifting, use, transcultural appropriation, reinterpretation, etc. One has also to acknowledge latent (as well as manifest) biases, as for instance the fact that the study of material culture has concentrated on manufactured artefacts, art, and luxuries to the detriment of raw materials, resources, and intermediate goods such as dyes, copper, mordants, etc. and other materials that served to create finished artefacts.52

The second problem faced by the application of material culture methodologies to the study of global and world histories is one of periodization. Museums and cultural institutions whose collections are formed by a sedimentation of artefacts acquired over decades and sometimes centuries, tend to present a view of the material past that is selective and often disciplinary bound.53 The more one moves in time towards the present, the more the materials available are abundant, comprehensive, and representative. The focus on artefacts—and most especially on those material things that because of their beauty, value, or cultural worth have been preserved over time—represents a challenge: these were the “exotic” items collected by early modern rulers, explorers, traders, and savants in Europe and by princes and emperors in many parts of Asia.54 Even if they were produced before the sixteenth century, they are often interpreted as part of early modern collecting practices. Yet their material histories suggest more complex

53 For an engaging critique of material culture methodologies in history and museum studies, see Laurel Thatcher Ulrich Ivan Gaskell, Sara Schechner, and Sarah Anne Carter, Tangible Things: Making History Through Things (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015).
chronological narratives. Take for example the many pieces of Ming blue and white porcelain to be found in museum and private collections across the world. While they are often used to illustrate early modern global exchange, they show the potential to think also about technological and aesthetic exchange from Iran to China from the fourteenth century onwards.55

The case of porcelain alerts us also to a third problem: the fact that more attention is attributed to long-distance than cross-regional or even regional exchange. Chinese porcelains traded to Europe are taken to be more representative of the early modern globe that similar porcelains traded to Southeast Asia or South Asia. Similarly, Indian cotton textiles traded to Europe and the Americas are given pride of place in global narratives over similar textiles traded to East Africa or Central Asia.56 One might say that the study of material culture has so far been unable to disenfranchise itself from established spatial narratives that for the early modern period privilege maritime (e.g., as already noted, by the European East India companies) over land exchange, and the horizontal movement from east to west over that of vertical axes from south to north.57 This article has no solution to this problem, though in the next section it considers some of the ways in which world and global historians might use material culture to rethink the spaces of the global.

THE SPACES OF THE GLOBAL

Daniel Lord Smail and Andrew Shryock’s provocative manifesto for a deep history is a warning of the danger of things. “Consider a shell bead from Europe around 40,000 years ago,” they state, “a shell that was collected, drilled, strung with other beads onto a necklace, and then worn for some of the same reasons that anyone wears a necklace today: to display a thing of beauty; to enjoy the pleasures of collecting; to

communicate status, taste, and fashion; to signal belonging; to add value to an object to generate power by giving or trading.”

Smail and Shryock warn us against the “eerie familiarity” of things that might contribute to making archaeologists’ interpretations intelligible, but create a storytelling based more on our assumptions than real facts. Fast forward 39,500 years and a similar problem might be found in the ways in which we infer histories of global connectivity from things. Historians are not archeologists: they rarely dig out their material evidence; instead they mobilize it in their historical narratives in ways that might puzzle archaeologists. While the latter construct theories through evidence (and might occasionally as Smail and Shryock claim, empathize too much with their object of study), historians often use material evidence to support theories and suppositions that have been constructed elsewhere, and most especially in the archive. As I argued elsewhere, for the global historian the issue is not whether material culture can be used to provide proof of global connectivity. The real value of material culture is that of articulating our spatial understanding of the past in ways that are not necessarily apparent in documentary sources, and through concepts that were not even recognized or understood by people of a particular time. Things, artefacts, luxuries, and commodities were not the embodiment of an extraneous system of connections; they created themselves global spaces and therefore are “actants,” to borrow Bruno Latour’s terminology.

I focus on four different ways in which objects might help us to reflect on the spaces of the global.

Tim Brook’s *Vermeer’s Hat* is an accessible and wonderfully engaging book based on vignettes created from single Vermeer paintings that show us how the seventeenth-century master’s choices of

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props reflected the cosmopolitan world of his Dutch contemporaries. One can see beaver from North America, porcelain and silks from China, pearls from the Indian Ocean, and European maps of the world. Here the global is conveyed within the space of a single “cosmopolitan space”: a room, or the space of a Dutch city. The armchair travelers of the seventeenth century could rely on the Dutch East India Company (VOC) and West India Company (GWC) to bring the world to their homes. Their understanding of the origins, cultural value, and even function of things might be quite different from those who produced them. This is also a global space that is extremely local: the scene set in Delft suggests that mobility and connectivity is at the service of the locality. Yet even a confined space such as that represented by Vermeer has a vast horizon. Early modern Europeans were keen to convey their cosmopolitanism in cabinets of curiosities, still lives with objects from Asia and the Americas, and in their “multicultural” interiors increasingly shaped by porcelain, textiles, and furniture imported by the East India Companies. We are left to wonder whether this self-promoted cosmopolitanism was only distinctively European or whether other routes such as for instance the long-standing central Asian silk roads could produce similar phenomena in India, China, and elsewhere.

Each of the artefacts and commodities represented by Vermeer have their own stories. Kopytoff calls it a cultural biography of things. One of the advantages of following the physical movement of material artefacts—in a similar fashion to following the movement of travelers—is that the geographic remit of what is considered is not predetermined. An example is this beautiful box produced from a rare Seychelles nut, the fruit of a palm called Lodoicea seychellarum, best known as “coco de mer” (Figure 5a). These types of artefacts are to be found in European kunstkammer, since in the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries they were collected as rarities. It was not uncommon to transform a piece of naturalia into an artefact by adding both functional and decorative parts in precious metals. The spatial circulation of this object is visible on its very own fabric: an object of collecting practices in Europe, its central silver band was added in Goa where natural objects like these were transformed into artefacts and

sourced for wealthy European collectors. The feet were added in the eighteenth century in Europe. Because of its rarity, seventeenth-century European accounts thought this nut to be growing underwater rather than on trees, as is the case in two islands of the Seychelles.64 This is an early form of “entangled object”—to use Thomas Nicholas terminology—an artefact that took shape by moving in space and over a long chronology, suggesting that the connectivity and spatiality of the early modern world was both

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64 The late sixteenth-century Italian merchant and traveller Francesco Carletti recounts to have seen what he called “Maldive coconuts” in Goa, “which are not found elsewhere. They are grown in the depths of the sea of those islands, and from there are thrown up on the shore, where they are found. In shape they are two nuts joined together, and they are longer by two times than the black cocos, but more solid.” Francesco Carletti, My Voyage Around the World, trans. Herbert Weinstock (London: Methuen, 1965), 225.
flexible and incremental in time.\textsuperscript{65} This artefact puts into contact the little-known space of the Seychelles, the flourishing Portuguese entrepôt of Goa in India, and the world of European courts, crisscrossing spaces that are often considered hermetically sealed. There was also nothing unidirectional in the path taken by this object. Cocos de mer were also used in Persia by Sufis as begging bowls (kashkul). While Sufis disavow most material objects, the kashkul is one of the very few items that a dervish would keep on his person (Figure 5b).\textsuperscript{66} Like in Europe, in Persia these functional bowls were later mounted to highlight their value.

The presence of the same type of rare artefacts in two different world geographies provides insights on the specificity of processes of commodification of the natural world, of trade, attribution of value, and the religious and cultural functions of artefacts. It also subverts established notions of connectivity that emphasize the role played by Europe in the shaping of global processes. Recent scholarship has used artefacts to investigate the relationship between the global and the local. The global trade of luxuries and commodities came to reshape local economies in places such as India and China. This was the case of entire Indian villages weaving cloth for international markets. Anne Gerritsen considers the space of the city of Jingdezhen in the Jiangxi province of China that for nearly a thousand years produced blue-and-white and other types of porcelain for global markets.\textsuperscript{67} Notwithstanding being located nearly a thousand km north of the port of Canton, thanks to its dragon kilns, the landlocked “city of porcelain” of Jingdezhen became the pulsing center for the production of artefacts traded worldwide well before the arrival of the European companies.

Histories of trade of the premodern world have underlined the importance of porcelain and textiles and their worldwide circulation. Yet they need to be qualified in two ways: first in the geographies of


\textsuperscript{66} An empty kashkul represents the voiding of the ego, which is required of a dervish before he can nourish himself with divine knowledge. https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/445960?&searchField=All&sortBy=Relevance&ft=coco+de+mer&offset=0&rpp=20&amp;pos=3.

exchange that they narrate and second in the actual material evidence that they use. On the latter point, it seems obvious that artefacts are important even when they are not beautiful museum pieces. Yet, historians do not make as much use of shards or textile fragments as they do of museum-quality artefacts. The small shards of broken vessels and cups that have been excavated in different parts of the world are very useful for global historical analyses. Archaeological surveys have revised our view of trade and material connection in the early modern period, mostly away from Europe. Thinly glazed porcelain cups of the Wan-li period (1572–1620) were unearthed during the archaeological survey of Jamestown in Virginia. They are a very small percentage of the 150,000 objects recovered from the site that include coins, decorative items, furnishing, potteries, and residue of food. Yet remains of a dozen Chinese porcelain cups show that at its very foundation in 1607–1610 Chinese artefacts were part of the material fabric of Jamestown. There is no certain proof but the Chinese cups found in Jamestown might be connected with similar porcelain shards unearthed at San Gabriel del Yunque, present-day New Mexico, that in the early seventeenth century was New Spain’s far north settlement. These remnants help us reframe established histories of material exchange. They bring renewed attention to the Pacific, in particular in connection to the Manila to Acapulco route opened in the 1570s through which thousands of pieces of porcelain and chinaware reached Mexico. Recent works have shown the profound links between the Spanish Empire in the Americas, and China and Japan. Yet, the shards in San Gabriel and in Jamestown alert us to the importance of considering what we might call the “accessibility” and “penetration” of Chinese objects even in rather remote parts of the rising Spanish empire and English colonies.

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Artefacts can also be used to revise our understanding of distance, not just geographical but also cultural. Material culture studies consider the poly-semantic value of “things”: their function to either bridge or reinforce cultural gaps, their value in creating strangeness and familiarity, and at gazing at other cultures, often unknown in the premodern world through verbal or written means. Global historians are increasingly asked to reflect on what people at the time made of such global phenomena, how they perceived, understood, and often misunderstood the world around them. Once the terrain of intellectual historians and historians of ideas, material culture now provides a means of reflection on how the global was constructed not just through concepts, models, and thoughts but also through materiality. This oblong faience tile panel produced in the Netherlands circa 1690–1730 now at the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam shows a Chinese landscape (Figure 6).

The goddess Guan Yin is shown sitting on a lotus flower and enveloped by a yellow sun. Scholarship on the history of print and the history of design has established that Chinese prints were available in the seventeenth-century Dutch Republic and were probably used as a source for earthenware decoration such as this. A number of smaller scenes are also depicted below. The dark figures on the panels are clearly South American, based on the clothing and feather regalia, which is typical of the Amazon region. They are based on illustrations from Arnoldus Montanus’ 1671 description of America. Here Asia and the Americas come together in a blending of motifs. The object shows an act of transposition to text and image, and from image to artefact. This is also an act of inventiveness, of construction of spaces that are not real but revelatory of the ways in which contemporaries perceived and categorized them. The Delft artist’s decision to make the figures darker may be linked to the fact that porcelain was long thought to have been made from white cowrie shells, which were natural objects associated with Africa. Whatever the explanation is, the value of an

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73 Arnoldus Montanus, De Nieuwe en Onbekende Weereld: of beschryving van America en ’t Zuid-Land (Amsterdam: Jacob Meurs, 1671), 158 and 440. For a facsimile edition see: https://www.s4ulanguages.com/marcgrave-montanus.html.
74 Asia in Amsterdam: The Culture of Luxury in the Golden Age, ed. Karina H. Corrigan, Jan van Campen, and Femke Diercks, with Janet C. Blyberg (Amsterdam: Rijksmuseum, 2015), cat. nr. 93. I thank Karina Corrigan and her colleagues at the Peabody Essex Museum for their help with the analysis of this important artefact. On this artefact see also Benjamin Schmidt, “Inventing Exoticism: The Project of Dutch Geography and the Marketing of the World, circa 1700,” in Merchants and Marvels, ed. Smith and Findlen, 354.
Object like this lies in its ability to show how the very concept of connection is far from monolithic and in the early modern period, as today, assumed different forms.

Material objects have a fascinating power: they convey stories, raise unknown aspects, and lead us to ask open questions that defy easy disciplinary, thematic, and chronological divides. Yet it is worth highlighting that commodities, luxuries, and artefacts can also reproduce established tropes of what we might call a “Whig interpretation of global history.” While the gravest danger of falling into a teleology of increasing connectivity is most often avoided, this is not the case when we consider the type of connectivity at stake. Most often than not, artefacts lead us to highlight positive and enriching connections—those of embassies, of trade, of cultural exchange and of conspicuous consumption—rather than the negative outcomes of connection: oppression, coercion, and obliteration that characterize instead modern narratives of empire, the rise of capitalism, and environmental exploitation. To recover those narratives historians need to read objects “against the grain” and integrate them with visual and written sources. This is the case of the history of slavery whose material legacy remains limited and complex in its interpretation. The Black Lives Matter movement has highlighted the discrepancy between the abundance of statues and public monuments dedicated to slave traders, plantation owners, and those who supported or profited from slavery and the paucity of artefacts related to enslaved people, their experience, and sufferings. The material legacy of colonialism is equally challenging especially for Western museums that have to acknowledge the very acts of violence that brought artefacts into their collections as for instance the Benin bronzes in many British museums. These are contested artefacts whose restitution claims far too often fall on deaf ears. Their histories alert us to the unequal exchange that existed between colonizers and colonized, between assailants and the attacked, and between the Imperial West and other parts of the world.

Equally complex is the use of material methodologies for the analysis of disconnection. As the world was reshaped in both locality and globality, many areas either remained unaffected by global forces and processes or were newly excluded from it. The old paradigm of the

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“European expansion,” for instance, is still with us when we emphasize horizontal connectivity across oceans (the Atlantic, the Indian, and the Pacific) and ignore instead vertical connections (for instance between the southern part of Asia and the Central Asia steppes). While material culture might be indeed a way to recover little known spatial ties in the early modern world, the same cannot be said of places that might have been “cut off” (at least from European connectivity) as in the case of the Central Asian silk roads.76

A GLOBAL MICROHISTORY OF THINGS

Material culture can be used as a tool to write global histories that are more nuanced in their understanding of space/place and of the relationship between the local and the global. Yet the recent attention given to what is now called “global microhistory” points to the renewed importance of the methodologies of global history and the role of people and agency in narratives of global change.77 Inspired by the work of Italian microhistorians, global historians appreciate the potential of using microhistorical methodologies to illuminate the micro as well as the macro. This is work in progress that already shows that global microhistory might have as many variants and varieties as microhistory had in the 1970s and 1980s.78

Earlier iterations of global microhistory paid attention to the lives of individuals who crossed geographic as well as cultural boundaries. Rather than narrate birds’ eye views of history, the experiences of transcultural agents such as Leo Africanus or unlikely protagonists such as Elizabeth Marsh provide a more personal, manageable, and, most of all, more intimate way to read broad global narratives.79 This methodology has shown an ability to recover human agency, provide greater sophistication, and foster identification in otherwise nameless

76 See Lally’s path-breaking analysis of the connection between India and central Asia: Lally, India and the Silk Roads, ch. 5.
processes of global change. The simple transposition of this methodology from people to things is less straightforward than one might imagine. There are at least three (and indeed there might be more) ways of conceiving a “global microhistory of things.” The first is to retain the focus on human actors and use “the material” as a way to characterize their global outlook. Can we reconstruct the material world of a (global) person? Two recent examples of this approach are an exhibition and catalogue, and a monograph, respectively. The first is the reconstruction of Margrieta Van Varick who was born in the Netherlands, but spent most of her life in the Dutch colonial world, first in Malacca and later in Flatbush (present-day Brooklyn). Having no surviving artefacts belonging to Van Varick, the inventory of her goods has been used to reconstruct her material world but also the world she lived in. Different from traditional approaches to the reconstruction of domestic or professional spaces and the material possessions of people, an inventory has been used here to qualify global connectivity and address the meaning of cosmopolitanism spacing across three continents through subjective experience. A similar approach has been adopted by Elizabeth Lambourn in her Abraham’s Luggage. This study reconstructs the trading goods and personal possessions of the twelfth-century merchant Abraham ben Yijū whose commercial activities and life spanned the Mediterranean, the Red Sea, and the Western Indian Ocean. I call this approach “ego-things” as material artefacts are used as traces to reconstruct global lives and address a series of themes, not least religion, family, and gender. Objects are here used to fill those unavoidable voids created by the

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85 Gender and Material Culture in Britain since 1600, ed. Hannah Greig, Jane Hamlett, and L. Hannan (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015); Merry Wiesner-Hanks, “Early Modern
silence of sources in the same way in which anthropological methodologies have done in micro-history.

As noted by Romain Bertrand and Guillaume Calafat in their analysis of global micro-history, to follow an actor “leads the historian to question situations that are unfamiliar, that is to say little documented and rarely mentioned with the same fanfare of those that commonly emerge from the tales of public history.”86 One might follow their line of thought and consider material things as tools to address the “little documented” or to provide lateral thinking in historical research. I call these “situational things,” as the material is mobilized to provide a new perspective on historical events and occasions that often transcend specific individuals. Objects, for instance, can be seen as active agents in the structuring of familial bonds of the connected lives of imperial families living in Britain, North America, and India in the eighteenth century as studied by Margot Finn and Emma Rothschild.87 These studies use “assemblages of things” to reflect on distance, memory, emotions, and loss in the everyday life of subjects who did not just promote empire and its ideology but had to negotiate the difficulty of structuring family and affections across geographic and cultural distance.88 Rather than seeing empire as a monolithic political and economic project that opposes colonizers and colonized, and core and periphery, the material allows us to use different scales of analysis and considers friendship, family ties, and the everyday in global history, opening new possibilities for comparative work across time and space.89 This is achieved on an imperial scale and from the perspective of British colonists and servants


89 This is for instance the case of Tsuneno, the main character in Stanley’s scholarship who is unable to find work because of her wardrobe, a situation well known to her contemporaries in Europe. Amy Stanley, “Maidens’ Tales: Narrating Domestic and Global History in Eurasia, 1600–1900,” The American Historical Review 121, no. 2 (2016):
of the East India companies: these examples raise useful questions for us to think about the history of emotions in a global framework of analysis. There is now substantial literature on the intersection between emotions and material culture at a local and national level as well as studies of the emotional entanglements with materiality for migrant and diasporic communities. Yet, the recovery of what I would define as a global “emotional palette” for the premodern period suffers from a profound lack of suitable material as well as written sources.

While the person remains central to the concerns of global microhistorians, historians of art and museum experts are well acquainted with the construction of what we might call “it-narratives,” taking the object as central and thus making it a historical subject. Historians instead have mostly followed Igor Kopytoff’s “cultural biography of things,” though such an approach tends to be still shaped through generic categories in works on textiles (cotton and silk), wood, silver, but also coral, rhubarb, etc. Moreover, the similitude between the biography of people and those of things can be misleading for the very reason that as history cannot be reduced to the biography of individuals, so material culture should not collapse into the biography of things. Rather than biography, in the case of material things I prefer “palimpsest,” a term used to denote a manuscript on which later writing has been superimposed on effaced earlier writing. Things are palimpsests as their materiality is continuously reshaped, modified, and even deleted. They also have palimpsests as their “lives” unfold in

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91 Yet notwithstanding much debate about the “agency of things,” for historians there are substantial differences between human beings and inanimate artefacts. This also includes a more fruitful debate on “animal history” and the agency of animals; discussions on Anthropocene and the division between humankind and nature. On the contours of “material culture,” see: Leora Auslander, “Beyond Words,” The American Historical Review 110, no. 4 (2006): 1015–1044; and Dana Leibsohn, “Broken Saints, House Cats, Other Historical matter,” in Writing Material Culture History, ed. Gerritsen and Riello, 20–27.

dynamics and temporalities that are neither linear nor human. It is the mercurial nature of things that make them particularly interesting for historians. They can, for instance, obviate the problem that “historical actors at the time would have been only rarely in a position to realize the magnitude and extension of those same [global] networks.”

Things can capture dynamics that were either misunderstood or not entirely articulated by contemporaries. Because of their re-contextualization across time, material artefacts serve also to rethink the cultural importance of specific events, people, and narratives. Through artefacts, Braudel’s “material life” approach finds new themes, topics, and methodologies that resonate with global history. Away from dwellings, individual possessions, and personal practices, a “global material life” reflects instead on the entanglement of materiality, human agency, and global processes of change.

This is the case for instance of ships. Of fundamental importance in global maritime routes, the transport of goods, people, and information in the premodern world and up until the twentieth century, ships remain little studied beyond histories of technologies charting their different types and technical solutions. They were instead “moving microcosms” that for months—and sometime years—traveled across oceans bringing together people and goods from different corners of the world. Their materiality was continuously reshaped as it is estimated that within thirty-six months most parts of a vessel had to be replaced. These “palimpsests of the sea” were the stage of revolts and mutinies, of contagious outbreaks, of language learning (as long voyages served to acquire linguistic expertise), and of terrible suffering as in the case of ships deployed in the slave trade. Often seen as tools of globalization, ships were not just a means of transport for moving intercontinentally, they were intrinsically part of the experience of the global in the premodern period, they shaped people’s perspective of space, place, and connectivity. They are today among the most fascinating research projects that bring together archaeologists, historians, museum curators, surveyors, conservators, and archivists in the study of existing

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vessels such as the famous Vasa in Stockholm (built 1626–1628), the
sixteenth-century Mary Rose now in Portsmouth, UK, and La Belle now
in Victoria, Texas (built 1684). While none of these were trade ships,
maritime archeology has unearthed remarkable shipwrecks and their
cargoes.97 This is the case for instance of the VOC vessel Batavia that in
1629 sunk off the coast of Western Australia leading to a mutiny and a
massacre among its 300 survivors.98

The study of shipwrecks alerts us to the fact that much research on
global material culture goes beyond the field of history. Archaeology
has provided extremely important findings.99 The study of the world
trade of ceramics and porcelain, for instance, can rely on impressive
archaeological findings ranging from the above-mentioned North
American digs to maritime archaeology. This is the case of the ninth-
century Tang Shipwreck now displayed at the Museum of Asian
Civilizations in Singapore from which more than a thousand pieces of
ceramics, gold, and silver were recovered.100 Equally important is the
cargo of the Esmeralda and the São Pedro, vessels making up Vasco da
Gama’s second voyage to India, which were wrecked in 1503 off the
coast of Oman.101 On land, by comparison, recent archeological
campaigns in China are changing our understanding of textile
techniques and tools, thus re-writing world histories of technologies
and their chronological unfolding. Such finds also include documents:
the eleventh- and twelfth-century fragments forming the so-called
Cairo Genizah documents have been known for over a century and

97 It is estimated that in their 300 years of activity 200–220 vessels of the English East
India Company and 246 of the Dutch VOC were lost around the world. R. Larn,
“Shipwrecks of the Honourable East India Company around the World,” International
Journal of Nautical Archaeology 19, no. 1 (1990): 13. See also D. H. Keith, and T. L. Carrell,
“Going, Going, Gone: Underwater Cultural Resources in Decline,” in International
Handbook of Historical Archaeology, ed. David Gaimster and Teresita Majewski (New York:
Springer, 2009), 105–139.

98 While the wreck is a diving destination, a replica of the ship was built in the 1990s.
Excavated items are on display at the Western Australian Museum. On the mutiny and
massacre see Mike Dash, Batavia’s Graveyard (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2002).

99 See for instance Historical Archaeology in South Africa: Material Culture of the Dutch
East India Company at the Cape, ed. Carmel Schrire (Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast Press,
2014).

100 For an overview of the findings see: https://www.acm.org.sg/galleries. This was also a
controversial and highly disputed salvage operation part of commercial maritime
archaeology.

101 Tânia Manuel Casimiro, “Material Culture from the Al Hallaniyah Island Early
16th-century Portuguese Indiaman Wreck-site,” International Journal of Nautical Archaeology
have been the subject of one of the largest projects of conservation, transcription, and interpretation of over 250,000 documents.\footnote{102 Cambridge Digital Library – Cairo Genizah: https://cudl.lib.cam.ac.uk/collections/genizah/1; Jewish Virtual Library – Cairo Genizah: https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/the-cairo-genizah. Lambourn reconstructs the material world of the twelfth-century trader Abraham ben Yijū from the Cairo Genizah document. Lambourn, Abraham’s Luggage.}

Such large-scale projects require a variety of skills—including rare linguistic and paleographic training—that can only be accessed through team-work. The quest for collaborative research in global history is perceived as a utopic truism; yet the interdisciplinary nature of much material culture research and the size of the task mean that an increasing number of projects have been organized around concerted efforts. These take the shape of crowdsourcing research, experimental teaching, voluntary participation, and ad-hoc projects connected to museum re-displays and exhibitions.\footnote{103 Examples are: De todas as partes do Mundo: O património do 5.º duque de Bragança, D. Teodósio I, ed. Jessica Hallett and Nuno Senos (Lisbon: Tinta-da-China, 2018), the outcome of a research project on the inventory of the fifth Duke of Bragança; “The Making and Knowing Project,” coordinated by Pamela H. Smith at Columbia University: https://www.makingandknowing.org; and Margot Finn and Kate Smith’s “The East India Company at Home”: https://blogs.ucl.ac.uk/eicah/.}

The opening of permanent galleries have been stimuli for a re-think of museums’ collections and their re-contextualization in narratives of global change, trade, and economic and cultural exchange. This is the case for instance for the re-display of the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford (UK) where “Asian Crossroads” and “East meets West” orientation galleries served to reshape area collections within a broader global canvas.\footnote{104 Ashmolean Museum, Oxford: https://www.ashmolean.org/first-floor.}

Museums can also act as catalyzers for the re-interpretation of established historical narratives: Milan, for instance, is a northern Italian city whose history, in opposition to Venice or Florence, has been mostly narrated in regional and national terms. A recent initiative by the Museo delle Culture di Milano (MUDEC) led to the opening of a 8,000 sq. ft permanent exhibition showing the city’s role since 1500 as a key node of the Spanish empire, as a colonial and anti-colonial city and today as a multi-ethnic metropolis.\footnote{105 MUDEC, Milan: https://www.mudec.it/ita/.}

CONCLUSION

Material culture presents several challenges as well as opportunities for global history. This article has surveyed the contours of what is called a “material turn” in global history by considering some of the key publications, projects, and museum initiatives over the past decade. Yet it has also presented an argument for the role of material culture in redefining two aspects of global history. First, the material turn is a chance to reconsider the ways in which the field of global history conceptualizes space and most especially the connectivity that characterized the premodern world. I have put forward four different ways to think about global spaces according to typologies that are: “cosmopolitan,” “of distance,” “local vs global,” and “moving” through material entanglements. Second, as global history considers the ways in which the agency of individuals can have meaningful value in global narratives, “small things” might be used both as ways to challenge established narratives and to provide different scales of analysis that range from micro to macro. The “material turn” in global history has therefore the potential to contribute not just new themes and topics but also new perspectives and lenses through which to interpret global phenomena.

Giorgio Riello is Chair of Early Modern Global History at the European University Institute, Italy, and Professor of Global History and Culture at the University of Warwick, UK. He is the author of Cotton: The Fabric that Made the Modern World (2013 – recipient of the WHA Bentley Book Prize). He has published widely on global trade between Europe and Asia, and on material culture and fashion in the early modern period. He is developing a project entitled “European Factories of the Indian Ocean, 1500–1800” considering the role played by European-controlled areas of trade in the Indian Ocean.