American Studies 570
American Decorative Arts and Material Culture
Prof. Anne Verplanck

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Office: Olmsted W 356 (R)  Classroom: Olmsted 207W: Tues. 6-8:45
Office hours: Tues/Th 3-4 and 5-5:45; also by appointment

Description: This seminar will examine American decorative arts in their historical context, focusing primarily on the period from 1750 to 1900. We will look at the production and consumption of decorative arts in cities, non-urban environments, vernacular traditions, and varied materials. Historic interiors will be addressed. The historiography of the field, as well as theories and methods of research and analysis (particularly material culture), will be covered. Regrettably, we cannot explore every subject and media in depth. Note that this is a seminar, which primarily depends on guided (me) discussion (you). There will be some lecture-like components, but students’ active, informed participation is at the core of this seminar.

Required texts
Laurel Ulrich, *American Homespun*
Briann Greenfield, *Out of the Attic*
Katherine C. Grier, *Culture and Comfort*

Grade:
Precis/presentations: 30%
Class participation: 30%
Final project/presentation: 40%

Reading:
There are several required texts for this course, and all are available, new or used, at the bookstore. Many of these books are used in courses all over the country, and should be readily available on line as well.

Each week we will all read a book and/or articles related to American decorative arts. For Feb. 7, you will each choose a work to read; you will post your précis by noon on Feb. 6 to the Angel dropbox (under Lessons); and you will present and discuss the work in class.

For Jan. 17, Feb. 21, and Feb. 28, you will each choose a different book or article to review, comment upon, and use as the basis for contributions to class discussion; no written reports are needed. On the 21st, please bring the book to class so we can have a less formal discussion while looking at the books.

During the first class you will choose the books for individual reading (this will allow you to obtain books through ILL or other sources); we can amend choices schedule if necessary. These books can be obtained through the PSU libraries—it normally takes several days for them to be delivered from within the PSU system, and will take slightly longer if they are not available.
within PSU. You do not need to buy these. If you have trouble obtaining a book, please let me know and I will work with you to find a solution. Please do not choose a book you have read or are about to read for another class.

One can get access to the required *articles* through our class Angel site (under Resources tab); through the library website (e-reserves), and, often, directly through databases such as JSTOR.

I will send notices to the class via Angel. Please note that if you connect your Angel mail to your PSU email, as well as your PSU email to your preferred email, you do not need to check (or neglect to check) multiple sites for messages.

For those who are new to PSU, please familiarize yourself with the outstanding library/internet resources here by checking out the library webpage and/or contacting Heidi Abbey, our liaison in the library.

**Final project:**
The final project is a 12-15 page (double-spaced) paper; see below.

A. Statement of final project and preliminary bibliography due **February 14** in class.
B. Optional deadline: draft of final paper, **April 10**, in class.
C. Final paper: due **May 1, 9 a.m.** (email or hard copy)

**Week #1**

January 10: Introduction; the Colonial Revival and the Historiography of American Decorative Arts

Reading: Greenfield, *Out of the Attic*

- Choose readings for Jan. 17 and Feb. 7, 21, and 28

Decorative arts/antiques/objects/material culture/stuff have a range of meanings and uses that often vary with time and place. Who are some of the key figures and what value(s) do decorative arts represent for them? How does Greenfield’s work situate decorative arts in American culture? Is there something uniquely American going on at the turn of the twentieth century?

**Week #2**

January 17: Approaches to Objects; Early American Furniture

Readings:

All read:

Choose one of the following


What are some of the methods and ways people have looked at “things”? Have these models held up over time? How have they changed over time? How would you apply some/all of these ideas to a topic that interests you (Pennsylvania German artifacts, ceramics, whatever)? How do these scholars’ approaches differ from what you already know about looking at stuff (from the lens of a folklorist, from the lens of a collector, from the lens of an historian)?

Week #3
Jan. 24: African-American Material Culture

Readings:


What are some of the lenses that have been used to analyze African-American material culture? What are the questions that scholars ask of African-American makers and users of decorative arts? Do the methods and modes of analysis differ from those in other studies? Is any of this literature inflected by the work of (Jules) Prown, Fleming, Montgomery, or Martin? Where do they fit in Carson’s analysis of the field?

Week #4
Jan. 31: Fabric/Cloth/Textiles/Clothing

Reading:
Ulrich, The Age of Homespun
Krill, EADA, 249-288.

What are some of the lenses that have been used to study and analyze textiles, their makers, and their users? Do the methods and modes of analysis differ from those in other studies? Is survival of materials an issue? What directions in textile studies can productively be followed?
Week 5

Feb. 7: Consumerism: The rest of the literature
Reading: All: review Martin from second class.

Prepare a 4-5 page précis (see guidelines below) on one of the following; post it to Angel dropbox by noon on Monday, Feb. 6.; be prepared to spend about 15 minutes in class discussing the work.

Richard Bushman, *The Refinement of America: Persons, Houses, Cities*
John Brewer, *Consumption and the World of Goods*
Cary Carson, “Why Demand?,” in Carson et al, Of *Consuming Interest,* 483-697. (Please do not choose if you were in Amst 533)
Daniel Miller, *Material Culture and Mass Consumption*
Grant McCracken, *Culture and Consumption*
Cowan, Ruth Schwartz, *More Work for Mother: The Ironies of Household Technology from the Open Hearth to the Microwave.*
Regina Lee Blaszczyk, *Imagining Consumers*
Jan de Vriese, *The Industrious Revolution: Consumer Behavior and the Household Economy, 1650 to the Present*
Martin, Ann Smart, *Makers, Buyers, and Users*

Week #6

Feb. 14: Gender and the Decorative Arts

Reading: Choose 2 of the following and be prepared to discuss in class:


Ellen Hartigan-O’Connor, *The Ties that Buy: Women and Commerce in Revolutionary America*
What craft activities and roles were available to women before 1850? How did women affect the trades as consumers, producers, and workers?

**Paper Proposal due:** be prepared to provide your classmates with a 5-minute summary of your project.

**Week #7**

Feb. 21: Inventory Madness and Historic Interiors

M. Michelle Morris, “‘A bed and curtains and all things thereto belonging’: context, value, and scarcity in eighteenth-century Massachusetts,” in Peter Benes, ed., *Textiles in New England II: four centuries of material life.*

Choose one book to discuss in class (no précis), bring book to class

- Jane Nylander, *Our Own Snug Fireside*
- Edgar Mayhew and Minor Myers, *A Documentary History of American Interiors*
- Harold Peterson, *American Interiors*
- Steven Parissien, *Interiors: The Home Since 1700*
- Roger Moss and Gail Winkler, *Victorian Interior Decoration*
- Peter Thornton, *Seventeenth Century Interior Decoration in England, France and Holland*
- Ian Gow, *The Scottish Interior: Georgian and Victorian Décor*
- John Whitehead, *French Interiors of the Eighteenth Century*
- Ajmar-Wollheim, *At Home in Renaissance Italy*

What are some of the approaches to studying interiors? How are (or aren’t) they connected to social history, art history, object-centered research, and archival-centered research? Many use period images—how do we test the reliability or accuracy of visual and documentary evidence?

**Week #8**

Feb. 28: Furniture 1750-1850

Reading for all: Krill, *EADA,* 83-152
Choose one to discuss in class (no précis):
- *American Furniture 2004*—4 essays of your choice, including Beckerdite and Miller, “A Table’s Tale,” and Lance Humphries, “Provenance, Patronage, and Perception.” 
  [http://www.chipstone.org/framesetAFintro.html](http://www.chipstone.org/framesetAFintro.html)
- Gerald Ward, ed., *Perspectives on American Furniture*
- Cooper and Minardi, *Paint, Pattern, and People: Southeastern Pennsylvania Furniture*
- Brock Jobe, *Portsmouth Furniture*
- Brock Jobe, *New England Furniture*
- Brock Jobe, *Harbor and Home*
- David Barquist, *American Tables and Looking Glasses*
- Morrison Hecksher, *John Townsend, Newport Cabinetmaker*
- Peter Kenny, *Duncan Phyfe*
- Peter Kenny, *Honore Lannuier*
- Benno Forman, *American Seating Furniture*
- Ronald L. Hurst and Jonathan Prown, *Southern Furniture, 1680–1830*
- Nancy Goyne Evans, *American Windsor Chairs* (any volume)

Or focus on discussions about furniture in:
- Jonathan Fairbanks et al, *New England Begins*
- Edward S. Cooke Jr., *The Great River*
- Jack Lindsey, *Worldly Goods*
- Hecksher and Bowman, *American Rococo*

Who is the audience for the book/journal? What does it contribute to the study of furniture specifically and to decorative arts, material culture, and cultural history more broadly? Does your work sustain an argument? If so, is it successful? What are the important themes in the construction of furniture? What kind of furniture did people own? How did furniture makers succeed?

**March 6: SPRING BREAK**

**Week #9**

**March 13:** Furniture and **REQUIRED** field trip

Meet at the shop of Kelly Kinzle, New Oxford, PA. Class will run from 6:30-8:30. We will discuss carpools in the previous class, but you are responsible for making alternative arrangements should your plans change.

**Reading:**
[http://www.chipstone.org/framesetAFintro.html](http://www.chipstone.org/framesetAFintro.html)

**Week #10**

March 27: Antebellum Material Culture

Reading:


Margaret Mulrooney, “All the Goods and Chattels,” *Black Powder White Lace*, 141-161; 249-258.


Compare these essays to your earlier reading. Do production methods change over time? Consumption patterns? Materials? Aesthetics? Do these change over space as well, or could you argue that taste, production, consumption, and/or technology are becoming more national. How does transportation affect these changes? Immigration? Jaffee and Mulrooney identify themselves as historians—how do their perspectives differ from Kenny’s?

**Week #11**

March 20: Ceramics

Reading: Choose an issue of *Ceramics in America* (2004 and before are available on line at Chipstone.org). Skim a representative sampling of articles (e.g. 4). Be prepared to discuss in class, based on the readings above and your sampling in CIA: What is the state of the scholarship? Do archeologists, collectors, and museum- and university-based scholars ask different questions, and what are they? Think about how the authors read the same forms of evidence. Compare and contrast their views on ceramics. How do they approach their subjects differently? What kinds of questions does each ask of the artifact? Which is more convincing and/or interesting to you and why?

**Week #12**

April 3: Decorative Arts 1850-1900

All read:


**Week #14**
April 10: The Turn of the Twentieth Century

Wendy Kaplan, “The Art that is Life”: The Arts and Crafts Movement in America, 1875-1920, pp. 52-60 (Kaplan/Clark), 208-221 (Boris).


Optional paper draft due

Week #15

April 17: The Colonial Revival

Reading: Review Greenfield, Out of the Attic


Student Reports: A-L (roughly), 10 minute, illustrated oral reports

Week #16

April 24:

All read:


Student Reports: L-Z (roughly), 10 minute, illustrated oral reports

Final Project due: Tues., May 1 at noon

Class Participation: You are expected to attend all classes and active and informed participation in discussions are central elements of the course. Our meetings will consist almost entirely of discussion of the assigned readings, so it is essential that you do the reading (both the main text and any required supplemental readings) and come prepared to discuss it. Discussion serves as a way of exploring and thinking about historical works and questions that gives us a more complete and complex understanding than any single point of view can provide. Classes are more intellectually rewarding for everyone when as many people as possible contribute.
Participating in scholarly discussions of this type is a skill in and of itself, and working on this skill is part of the purpose of the course. Your ability to participate meaningfully in this class will play a large role in determining the participation part of your final grade. Thus, regular, positive contributions to discussion are a baseline expectation for the class; your participation and presentations will be graded on content as well as relevance, organization, and delivery.

Information for oral and written reports and some questions to consider when reading:

- What is the book’s/article’s overall argument and historiographical orientation?
- What more specific arguments and evidence make up this larger whole?
- How do these points relate to other works we have read and to the field as a whole?
- In what way do they build on precedents and ideas in other works?
- In what ways do they challenge or reject other interpretations or approaches?
- Is the argument persuasive and/or interesting?
- Is it particularly creative, important, or insightful, and in what ways?
- What sorts of evidence and primary source material does the author use?
- Are these sources new or underutilized? If not, does the author use old material in new ways?
- Does the evidence support the argument?
- How does the author account for the inherent biases and limitations of the evidence?
- Does the author ignore or minimize important issues that might undermine or change the argument?

I encourage everyone to read reviews of the books, when available. Journals that tend to review decorative arts and material culture books include Winterthur Portfolio, West 86th (Bard’s decorative arts journal), MESDA Journal, Ceramics in America, and American Furniture; not all of these will appear in JSTOR.

For the Feb. 7 precis:
Prepare a 4-5 page double-spaced paper. Please post a copy on the class Angel site by noon on Monday, Feb. 6, and provide me with a hard copy at the beginning of class. These papers will provide you and your classmates with summaries and interpretations that will be particularly useful during preparation for comprehensive and other exams. Please do not choose books that you have read or are about to read for another class.

See bullet points above. Summarize the main points, critique the work (your paper should analyze rather than simply describe the work), and comment on methodology and theoretical perspectives of the authors.

The paper should have one paragraph summarizing the book’s argument and project as succinctly as possible without sacrificing accuracy and important nuances, and another paragraph on your critical response to this argument/project and its execution in the book (in this case “critical” does not necessarily mean negative, but rather engaged and analytical). Your response should focus on substantive intellectual and interpretive issues rather than matters that are primarily aesthetic or formal (e.g., there were too many big words, it was boring, you felt maps would have been useful, or you would have preferred footnotes to endnotes). Note the
author’s argument and how he or she substantiates it. Is the argument effective? What biases
does he or she bring to it? What is omitted that perhaps should not be? **Centrally, how does this
work relate to the other assigned reading for the week?**

Reading reviews is expected. That said, I want *your* analysis, not a listing of others’ responses to
the work.

**Written work:** Assignments are due to me (printed, stapled, double-spaced, numbered, 12-point
typeface, 1” margins; not right-justified; no funky spacing or typefaces, please) at the beginning
of class on the designated date (the Feb. 7 precis should also be posted on Angel on Feb. 6). If in
doubt about style, consult the Chicago Manual or MLA Style guides; the library website
provides good models ([http://www.libraries.psu.edu/psul/researchguides/citationstyles.html](http://www.libraries.psu.edu/psul/researchguides/citationstyles.html)).

Resources should be footnoted (the social science style of reference (e.g. Verplanck, 5) is *not*
acceptable. Clear writing and good grammar are expected. You are welcome to omit title pages,
print on both sides of a page, etc., to save ink and paper.

**Final project:**

Research and write a 10-15-page paper on American decorative arts that includes *your new
information and ideas* about the past, presented as a scholarly argument. Topics might involve an
account book, inventories, and/or surviving objects that are placed in a social, economic,
religious, ethnic, and/or racial context. Students are encouraged to submit an abstract of this
paper to an actual conference.

Submit a two- to three-page research *proposal* on February 14. This proposal should include (1)
the question that you hope to ask, (2) a description of the primary sources you plan to use, (3) a
list of at least five 4 secondary sources related to your project, and (4) the value and significance
of your proposed topic. Please be sure to explain what your research contributes to the field.

Your topic must be *different* from one we have discussed in class and rely at most on two
readings from this class. If you significantly change or revise your project, I need to see the
information listed above ASAP (and definitely by March 13).

The research paper must be based on primary research. This research could include the artifacts
themselves or it could use documents that tell us about material culture of the past, such as wills
or probate inventories, tax records, census data, or other relevant types of records. However,
material culture must be at the core of your project. If you use artifacts in your analysis, please
include photographs or other types of illustrations to illustrate what you are studying. If you use
written documents, you might consider ways in which you could organize your data for the
reader or perhaps relate what you are finding in the written records to the artifacts themselves.

The paper must also incorporate secondary sources to place your research into a broader context
of material culture scholarship, both in methodology and in the topic under discussion. Students
should consult at least eight secondary sources. You may utilize up to three secondary sources
and scholars from the readings, but you must also locate five additional secondary sources
relating to your topic. Always consider what contribution your work makes to the field and be
sure to highlight that contribution in the introduction and conclusion of your paper.
Each research paper must include footnotes or endnotes and a complete bibliography of both primary and secondary sources and must follow the Chicago Manual of Style in the format and any other matters of style.

Please note that the paper that you turn in must be written specifically for this class. You may not “double-dip” by writing a paper for this class that you also plan to use for another class this semester.