

## ANTH 4365 Museum Fundamentals (Spring 2018)

### Course Information

Title: Museum Fundamentals: Material Culture Interpretation and the Museum  
311 Education Building  
MW 3:00-4:20  
Credit: 3 hours

### Instructor Contact Information

Dr. Elisabeth Sommer  
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### Instructor Introduction (who the heck am I?)

I began my professional life as a professor of European History. I then saw the light and turned my attention to museums. I did graduate coursework in Public History/Museum Studies at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro, and then held positions at the Staten Island Historical Society (Director of Research and Interpretation) and Roanoke Island Festival Park on the Outer Banks of N.C. (Manager of Education and Interpretation), after which I taught Museum Studies at the University of Mary Washington in Virginia. Most recently I served as Education Curator for the El Paso Museum of Art. I have also done work for the Thomas Wolfe State Historic Site in N.C., the Asheville Art Museum, Historic Kenmore, and the Fredericksburg Area Museum and Cultural Center. I hold a BA in History from UNC-Greensboro and a PhD in European History from the University of Virginia. Okay, that's more than enough about me.

### Course Description

Objects lie at the heart of most museums, but it is only when they are given meaning by and to visitors that they gain value. This class is about material objects, the things we leave behind, the objects we write about, the things we or others create, and what uses and meanings they have for our understanding of ourselves, of others, and of the past. In the first part of the course we will explore some of the theories developed by scholars in their attempt to explain the meanings of things, and test our own analytical skills on specific types of material culture. In the second part we will look at how museums engage visitors with objects and the challenges of translating theory into practice within the interpretive process.

### Course Style

Please take note—the success of this class depends on your willingness to do the following:

**Read** the assignments **carefully**

Read them **on time**

**Add your voice** to the general discussion

Notice my previous use of the term “we.” This class is not the Dr. Sommer show. While I will certainly steer the discussion and occasionally regale you with tales from the field, the true

success of the class will depend on your ability to **keep up with the reading assignments** and be prepared to **discuss them** on the date for which they are listed.

To make a fruitful discussion possible you will either need to take very careful notes from the readings or print the readings out and bring them to class for reference (or both). The assigned readings to be covered each class period are listed in parentheses after the topic.

### Course Goals

The class is primarily designed to do three things—1) introduce you to **thinking with and about things** in new ways and to some of **the methods scholars use** to analyze material culture 2) give you some **experience with analyzing** the relationship between things and society 3) place the analysis of material culture **within the context of museums and visitors**. To give the class structure I have divided the course into two parts and some general themes. There are also some days dedicated to practicing analytical skills using various types of primary source material.

### Reading Assignments

- Articles from Arthur Asa Berger, *What Objects Mean: An Introduction to Material Culture* (on Blackboard)
- Articles from Steven Lubar and David Kingery eds. *History from Things: Essays on Material Culture* (on Blackboard)
- Miscellaneous articles (on Blackboard)
- *Museum Gallery Interpretation and Material Culture*, Juliette Fritsch, ed. (in the bookstore and on Amazon)

### Writing Assignments

You will have **three brief (3-4 page) writing assignments** and an **exhibition proposal project (7-9 pages)** that will serve as your final exam. The proposal should focus on the interpretation of a type/group of objects or social practice/ritual in which objects play a role. The proposal will include a basic description of the exhibition's focus, an argument for its relevance and significance, a statement of the theoretical interpretive basis, an object list, and interpretive goals. Specific instructions will be posted on Blackboard.

Remember that **this proposal serves as a final examination**, and as such, should demonstrate both your ability to use basic research skills and your understanding of theories and approaches covered in class. Various **steps toward the final product**, such as a bibliography and statement of purpose, **will be due over the course of the semester**. Meeting these deadlines will prevent your proposal from going in the wrong direction and melting down at the last hour. You will also **present your proposal** to your fellow students, and the presentation will form a part of the final project grade. Presentations should have some visual or material component.

### Paper Format:

Papers are to be double spaced with proper paragraphing. **All opinions that are not the result of your own analysis need to be notated, as do all quotations (even if it is only a phrase)**. For

notations, please use The Chicago Manual of Style for either footnotes or endnotes. All papers should have a clear introductory thesis paragraph that establishes the argument to be made in the body of the paper. The body of the paper should include specific examples to support the points made.

The Danger Zone:

The following is a list of mistakes that make me scream and tear my hair out. While this might be very amusing for you, remember that I hold the power of the grade.

Papers with no clear thesis

Use of “would of” to mean “would have” and all other phonetic spelling silliness (what else would you call it? “Would of” simply makes no sense.)

Incorrect use of “amount” and “number” (“number”=a group of individual objects, such as balls, houses, trees, cookies, etc. “amount”=water, flour, concrete etc.)

Switching “their” and “there” (not interchangeable)

Using commas for periods and vice versa

Incomplete sentences (except in very rare occasions for emphasis)

Incorrect use of apostrophes (only used to indicate possession or for a contraction, not in the case of plurals—I don’t care what sign producers do)

## Grades

General Guidelines:

The following is intended to give you a general idea of my grading standards. Be aware that there are lot of “gray areas” within these guidelines (I have not, for instance, specified pluses and minuses). While these are designed for the short essays, they will also form the basis for the assessment of the proposal project.

**A** = Paper is well organized, with a clear thesis and supporting evidence/examples. It contains no major spelling or grammatical errors (i.e. has been proofread). It includes references from more than one of the assigned readings, and demonstrates an ability to compare and contrast differing methodologies, where relevant. It also shows careful and thoughtful reading of the assignments and an understanding of the material from lectures and discussions where these are relevant to the topic.

**B** = Paper is generally well organized, with a minimum of structural errors. It shows a good grasp of the issues pertinent to the topic, but may misinterpret them in some ways or fail to use the strongest examples to support the argument/analysis. The use or discussion of methodologies is limited. **A “B” is a perfectly respectable grade.**

**C** = Paper is loosely organized, and focus is not immediately clear. It contains a fair number of structural errors (i.e. has not been proofread). It lacks sufficient solid examples to support the argument/analysis. It may be too subjective and/or does not clearly relate to the assigned readings where they are relevant to the topic. The use of methodology (ies) is not clear or demonstrates a misunderstanding of it/them.

**D** = Paper is basically unorganized, with glaring grammatical and spelling errors. It shows little understanding of the assigned readings or issues discussed in class, or it indicates a serious misunderstanding of the same. The author needs to come and see me.

Grading Breakdown:

Discussion/Participation	15% (includes attendance)
First Short Paper	15%
Second and Third Papers	20% each
Research Proposal	30% (includes presentation)

Here's the Fun Stuff!

Jan. 17: Introduction to Material Culture Analysis and Museums (or what the heck am I doing in this class?)

### **Part I: Analyzing Material Culture**

Jan. 22: The Things Around Us (bring in an object for analysis—no, I'm not going to analyze it, you are)

#### Thinking about the Place of Things in Society

Jan. 24: The Role of Things (from *History from Things* Mihalyi Csikszentmihalyi, "Why We Need Things"-Blackboard)

How does Csikszentmihalyi think we use things? How does his theory compare to what you discovered in your object analysis?

#### Form versus Substance (bet you didn't know there was a difference)

Jan. 29: The Case for the Importance of Form (from *History from Things* Jules Prown, "The Truth of Material Culture: History or Fiction?"; Arthur Berger, *What Objects Mean* "A Freudian Psychoanalytic Approach" both on Blackboard)

**First Brief Writing Assignment Due:** Summarize and assess Prown's analysis of either the two teapots or the two tables. How does his approach demonstrate the use of Freudian psychoanalytic theory? Do you find Prown's analysis persuasive? Why or why not?

Jan. 31: The Case for the Importance of Substance (from *History from Things* Robert Friedel, "Some Matters of Substance")

What does Friedel point out about the role of substance in the study of material culture? How does his argument relate to Prown's theory?

#### Investigating Early American Material Culture

Feb. 5: The Anglo-American Tea Ceremony (from *American Material Culture* Rodris Roth, "Tea Drinking in Eighteenth Century America: its Etiquette and Equipage" -Blackboard) What does Roth identify as the significance of tea-drinking and its material culture? What sources does she use in her analysis?

Feb. 7: Primary source analysis: Some Eighteenth-Century Inventories (review the inventories posted on Blackboard; also Berger, "Sociological Analysis of Material Culture") How can we use inventories to discover information about life, values, and changes in eighteenth century America? How might we apply sociological analysis to do this?

### Fashion as Rhetoric

Feb. 12: The Language of Dress in Colonial America (Linda Baumgarten, "The Myths and Meanings of Clothing" from What Clothes Reveal -Blackboard)  
How does Baumgarten think that 18<sup>th</sup> century clothing "spoke?" Can clothing "speak?"

Feb. 14: In class analysis of eighteenth century and contemporary dress (analysis based on Berger, "Semiotic Approaches to Material Culture" - Blackboard)- **exhibition proposal topic due**

### Food, Glorious Food

Feb. 19: Video *Food and Life*

Feb. 21: The Sociology of Food (from The Taste of American Place, Gaye Tuchman and Harry Gene. Levine, "New York Jews and Chinese Food: The Social Construction of an Ethnic Pattern" - Blackboard)  
How do the authors explain the relationship between Jewish culture and Chinese food? What does this analysis suggest about the role food can play in society?

### Technology and Social Change

Feb. 26: The Impact of Technology on the American Home (Ruth Cowan, "Coal Stoves and Clean Sinks: Housework Between 1890 and 1930"-Blackboard)

Feb. 28: The Impact of Technology on the American Home Continued (Thomas Schlereth, "Conduits and Conduct: Home Utilities in Victorian America" both on Blackboard)

How do the respective authors tie technological changes to changes in American households and social relations? Is one more convincing than the other? **second writing assignment due** (topic posted on Blackboard)

### The Modern American Consumer

Mar. 5: Selling It (from *American Material Culture*, Alison J. Clarke, "Tupperware: Product as Social Relation"-Blackboard)

What does Clarke see as the social significance of Tupperware? Can we speak of a “culture” of Tupperware?

Mar. 7: You’ve been waiting for it (you just didn’t know it)—Video *Barbie Nation* **introductory description for exhibition proposal due**

Mar. 12: Spring Break!! (we all needed that)

Mar. 14: We’re still on Spring Break!!

## **Part II: Interpreting Material Culture in Museums (discussion questions posted on Blackboard)**

Mar. 19: From Theory to Practice: A Discussion of the Challenges of Translation and Audience (reading TBD)

Mar. 21: The Impact of Theory on Collections Practices (Fiona Cameron, “Museum Collections, Documentation, and Shifting Knowledge Paradigms” from Gail Anderson, ed. *Reinventing the Museum* -Blackboard)

### Interpretation in the Museum Context

Mar. 26: Museums in Society (George Hein, “The Museum as Social Instrument” from Juliette Fritsch, *Museum Gallery Interpretation and Material Culture*-yes, we’ve finally gotten to it)

Mar. 28: Museum Communication (Paulette M. McManus, “Invoking the Muse” *Museum Gallery Interpretation*-hereafter referred to as Fritsch)

Apr.2: Challenges of Interpreting Art Objects (Cheryl Mezaros, “Interpretation and the Art Museum: Between the Familiar and the Unfamiliar” Fritsch)

Apr. 4: Museum Objects and Context (Lisa G. Corrin, “Mining the Museum: An Installation Confronting History” from *Reinventing the Museum*; “An Interview with Fred Wilson” from *The Journal of Museum Education* vol. 23, no.3-both on Blackboard)

### Interpretation, Personal Experience, and Memory

Apr. 9: Exhibiting Clothing (Torunn Kjolberg, “‘I Loved It Dearly’: Recalling Personal Memories of Dress in the Museum” Fritsch)

Apr. 11: Exhibiting Elvis (Mariruth Leftwich, “Welcome to My World: Personal Narrative and Historic House Interpretation” Fritsch)-**third writing assignment due** (topic on Blackboard)

Apr. 16: Exhibiting Folk Life (Marzia Minore, “Narrative Museum, Museum of Voices: Displaying Rural Culture...” Fritsch)

Testing Interpretation: Bridging Objects and the Visitor

Apr. 18: Objects as Gateways to Understanding and Exploration (David Francis et al, "An Evaluation of Object-Centered Approaches to Interpretation at the British Museum" Fritsch)

Apr. 23: Asking the Audience (Effrosyni Nomikou, "The Other Side of the Coin: Audience Consultation and the Interpretation of Numismatic Collections)

Apr. 25: Curators and Visitors, a Dialogue (Sarah Ganz Blythe and Barbara Palley, "'Reading the Walls': A Study of Curatorial Expectation and Visitor Perception" Fritsch)

Apr. 30: Student Presentations

May 2: Student Presentations

**Final Exhibition Proposal due to me in my office on Monday, May 7 by 5:00!**