
H-France Review Vol. 23 (November 2023), No. 195

Ashli White, *Revolutionary Things: Material Culture and Politics in the Late Eighteenth-Century World*. New York and London: Yale University Press, 2023. 392 pp. Notes and index. \$50.00 U.S. (hb). ISBN 9780300259018.

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For researchers who may be unfamiliar with the material turn in historiography, the title of this book requires some unpacking. Ashli White wants us to view her study as a bridge uniting research on “things” (objects, artefacts) to the concerns of traditional historians whose subject matter is normally to be found in archives and libraries. In the process of bridge-building, however, she also wishes to reshape the understanding of the past of both constituencies. On the one hand, the category of “things” worth scrutinizing is expanded beyond the usual remit of material culture researchers, while on the other, text-based historians are reminded of the potential of “things” not only to illustrate their narratives but in some senses to participate in them as well. The result, we are promised, is “a new materialist history of the age of revolutions” (p. 307).

The focus, then, is on everyday objects, and not just on the objects themselves, but on how they were made and used (and often re-used) in multi-layered and constantly shifting geographical, social, and political contexts. This inquiry takes place in what she dubs an Atlantic World caught up in the throes of revolution (c. 1770–1810). As a setting, this Atlantic World bears comparison with the “Atlantic Economy” of mainstream historians in as much as it links together the American Revolution, the French Revolution, and slave revolts in the Caribbean. The question dear to Atlanticists of just where to center the causes of all this revolutionary turmoil is not the issue here, though. Generally speaking, White’s objects are made in and distributed from Europe. It is the meanings attributed to them when they fell into the hands of non-European others that chiefly interest her.

What objects are we talking about? In rough order, the book discusses the following: ceramics, small metal goods, clothing, personal accessories, maps and prints, and waxworks. Predictably, Josiah Wedgwood’s ubiquitous Queensware receives a lot of attention as does manufacturer Matthew Boulton’s production of buttons and populuxe wares. The provocative national guard uniform that *homme de couleur* Vincent Ogé acquired in Paris and brought to the Caribbean in 1790 probably sported buttons stamped in Birmingham. The ribbon and medallion accessories that enjoyed such wide currency in the Atlantic World often emanated from the English West Midlands as well. After 1789 much ribbon was rerouted or repurposed to make sashes for officials and liberty cockades for ordinary people on either side of the Atlantic.

Maps came from the metropolises as well and, despite their sensitive and contested nature, enjoyed a wide circulation, notwithstanding the vagaries of war and revolution. Much the same could be said of the production of prints. White focuses particularly on the ways in which portraits and depictions of crowd scenes were understood in different locations and social milieus. Waxworks are perhaps a more unusual category of objects with which to make an argument, but she points out that there was already an established market for wax sculptures in late eighteenth-century Europe before 1802. That is to say, when the wax artist Madame Tussaud brought models of severed heads from Paris to London for display. Miniature guillotines, we learn, also formed part of the stock-in-trade of the era's amusement industry. They were crafted by French prisoners of war from bone fragments and then sold to English consumers.

All of these objects repay study even if several of them have already benefited from the attention of mainstream cultural historians.^[1] The challenge lies rather in the ways in which they can be usefully bracketed together and subjected to interrogation. At the most basic level, the author asks how different peoples responded to such objects. What meanings did they find in them, or ascribe to them? In conditions of incipient politicization, were objects perhaps capable of shaping popular perceptions of equality and freedom? Can the prevalence or durability of demand for certain objects shed light on the processes of continuity and change over time? In other words, did people stop admiring, and seeking to acquire, certain artefacts just because they were products of a European old regime that paid scant attention to the rights of men, let alone those of women or slaves? On the whole, she finds, would-be consumers did not like being told what meaning to attach to objects (the iconic teapot emblazoned with "No Stamp Act" is an example).

The reception of objects, whether utilitarian or decorative, among enslaved, or newly emancipated, inhabitants of Saint-Domingue, the future independent republic of Haiti, requires particularly sensitive analysis. White devotes many pages to teasing out the layers of meaning surrounding objects in this setting. To be sure, the low survival rate of domestic material culture in the West Indies precludes definitive answers. Nevertheless, she is able to demonstrate both the multivalency of objects once they arrived in France's Caribbean colonies and the remarkable capacity of colonial populations to adapt European "things" to their own purposes. Wedgwood's Queensware could appear both reformist and conservative depending on who was using it and where. For French plantation owners in dispute with their metropole, it tended to carry the latter charge. Original ownership was soon detached in any case. Men of African descent had no qualms about adapting European military dress, or for that matter European military maps, to meet their own needs and political agendas. No wonder Bonaparte and his advisers came to detest the sight of epaulettes on the shoulders of black soldiers. They signaled a claim to citizenship.

The author assures the reader that her choice of objects for study is not random. Rather, the focus has been placed on the "types of things that cut across class and race, and that moved across borders" (p. 306). Each object category, moreover, has been examined methodically from the perspectives of "fabrication," "use" and "context" (p. 8), what she terms their materiality. This is admirable, but objects are recalcitrant, and the ambition to marshal them in this way and then to interrogate them systematically is not always achieved. Amid the welter of descriptive details about how objects were made, used, and moved, it is easy to lose sight of the structure. Sometimes, despite her best endeavors, the frame for analysis is simply unable to cope with the burden. This can result in rather pedestrian conclusions, on the subject of the use of

maps in the Caribbean for instance. Occasionally, the presence of an object, whether in homes, museums, or trading networks, defeats all attempts at explanation as well. To take the most problematic category, it is unclear how contemporaries reacted to wax models of severed heads and bone guillotines. They opened a “Pandora’s box” (p. 284) of emotions apparently, but the ultimate meaning of such artefacts “remains elusive” (p. 304).

Whether this book amounts to a new materialist history of the Age of Revolutions can be questioned. Combining two historiographical constituencies on the fraught terrain of war and revolution necessarily produces areas of friction. Some mainstream historians of the eighteenth century may find the effort the author devotes to the “material” as opposed to the “cultural” substance of her chosen objects rather obsessive and antiquarian. Nevertheless, the point that objects cannot simply be read in a one-dimensional way is well taken, and so is the point that they could play a role as dynamic participants in the struggles of the Age of Revolution. In any case, as she remarks in her conclusion, the future appears to lie with the object-centered approach. Most people today access history not through scholarly monographs, but via artefacts in museum collections, physical landmarks, and sites of memory.

NOTE

[1] See, for example, Maxine Berg, *Luxury and Pleasure in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005) and Kate Smith, *Material Goods, Moving Hands: Perceiving Production in England, 1700--1830* (Studies in Design and Material Culture) (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2014).

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ISSN 1553-9172