American Material Culture
Wesleyan University – Fall Semester 2012

Professor Breanne Robertson

Tuesdays, 1:10-4:00 p.m.
CAMS 3

Sewing Sampler by Sally Noble, 1798. Silk on linen, 10 in. by 8 ¾ in. Collection of the Bush House Museum, Salem, OR.

Course Description
This course is an introduction to the problems of understanding, analyzing, and writing about art and material culture. It asks four fundamental questions:

1. What is the nature of art and visual representation?
2. How do we – as observers, consumers, cultural critics, and historians – interpret and make sense of material objects?
3. What issues are at stake in visual representation and interpretation?
4. How does art shape social norms and social values?

Due to the introductory nature of this course, we will survey a variety of objects from a number of American cultural traditions. Generally, we will focus on a particular class of objects each week – retablos, gravestones, quilts, and photograph albums, for example – and learn to look at and analyze those objects. At the same time, we will address a particular approach to the study of material culture or a specific problem of interpretation. As we will learn, each object raises certain issues of production, reception, and historical analysis, and intersects with larger cultural discourses regarding class, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, historical change, and cultural contact, among others. By the end of the course, you will have a broad grasp of American material culture and the myriad ways it shapes our social norms and cultural values. In addition, you will have developed skills of visual and historical interpretation and will be prepared for advanced courses in the history of art, folklore, and material culture.
EMAIL
You may email me at brobertson@wesleyan.edu.

OFFICE HOURS
My office hours are on Wednesdays from 1:00 – 3:00 p.m. and by appointment.
My office is located in 41 Wyllys, Room 304.

REQUIRED TEXTS
There are two required books for this course.


RECOMMENDED TEXTS
ISBN: 9780136138556

ISBN: 9780761942269

RESERVE READING
Additional readings for this course are on reserve at Olin Library and available through the electronic reserves or course documents section of Moodle, which is accessible through moodle.wesleyan.edu. Reserve readings are indicated by the letters RSRV, ERES, or PDF in parenthesis in the course outline section of this syllabus. To access the readings marked ERES on the syllabus, go to the library homepage at www.wesleyan.edu/libr. Click on the ITEMS ONLINE – ERES link under RESERVES in the FIND bucket. Password: AMST210

You can also access these readings from off campus by using your Wesleyan user name and password.

Readings may be added or deleted during the semester.

MOODLE
All course information including syllabus, research paper guidelines, electronic reserve readings, and research tips can be found on Moodle. I will post announcements to Moodle; be sure to check the course site once a week.

You can sign in to Moodle from your portfolio or at https://moodle.wesleyan.edu/login/index.php

COURSE REQUIREMENTS
In addition to providing a broad survey of the approaches and issues that shape the study of American art and material culture, this class endeavors to develop your skills of critical reading, writing, and looking. The assignments are designed to enhance your abilities in these areas.

A. READINGS
All readings for the course are to be done weekly. You are expected to read all of the material for this course.
B. WEEKLY BLOG AND LEARNING PORTFOLIO ASSIGNMENT (40%)

To help you consider what is meaningful to you, I am asking you to regularly reflect on the readings and discussions in your blog. I will also ask you to engage each other outside of class by reading and commenting on your classmates’ blogs. These weekly blog posts will constitute 25% of your final grade, while a self-reflective learning portfolio of your semester’s work will constitute the remaining 15%.

Weekly Blog Responses

Each student will contribute regularly to his or her class blog, posting an approximately 250-word response to the week’s readings.

I propose these two questions as a starting point for each weekly blog post. Please feel free to develop your own question(s). The best questions are those that lead you to a deep exploration of something that matters to you.

- What struck you most in reading today’s assignment? What was puzzling, intriguing, gratifying, troubling, or upsetting? Why?
- What specific thing (an image, a metaphor, a passage, or a concept) would you like to hang onto? Why does it resonate with you? How is it related to your intellectual journey in the field of American Studies?

Purpose

In this course you will blog extensively. Blogs will be used as a vehicle for your reflection on readings as well as goings on in the course. We will use blogging in this course to accomplish an important goal – to connect your reading experience to your classroom experience by means of an ongoing conversation that takes place virtually and in person. Your posts help us understand your engagement with the readings before class, knowledge which we incorporate into class discussion. Afterward, your blogging allows you to capture and synthesize your thoughts generated during class and connections you are making personally to the material.

Protocol

- Read or view each assignment.
- When posting, use this convention for a title: yourmailid.date(mm/dd/yy).title
- Post your response in your blog, beginning with the 2 questions above. Or, if you have a burning idea that simply must be expressed, you may make your own observation (and I encourage you to do so). **You must do this by 1:00 P.M. the day of class.**
- Each Wednesday after class, write a blog post in your personal blog summarizing what you consider to be a salient or evocative point from the discussion. It should be an observation that concludes with a question. These blog posts are called “synthesizing responses.” Keep in mind that these blog posts need to be rich enough that your fellow students will engage with them and the question you raise. The questions, then, needs to be genuine, a question you are genuinely interested in exploring and that you feel will be interesting and intriguing to your fellow students. **These synthesizing posts are to be completed by Friday, 1:00 P.M.**
- **By Monday, 1:00 P.M.,** comment on two other classmates’ synthesizing responses, responding to the question they had posed.

Evaluation

In evaluating your blog posts, I am checking to make sure your posts are timely and substantive. You will be able to miss as many as two (2) of the regular blogging posts without penalty. The synthesizing posts, however, are more critical to your and the class’s success.
Rubric
1. The most important aspect of this assignment is to do it. Don’t be a perfectionist – if you have done the reading and attended class, your intuitions are bound to be of value. If they are not well expressed, this is one way to develop the muscle that converts the ideas in your head to the words in your mouth – this is what college is for. The point of blogging is not to produce perfect or even completely coherent ideas, but to begin the process of talking, thinking, reflecting, and writing.
2. Timeliness is essential. Obviously, for this process to work, your comments and blogs have to be submitted on time. We are creating a rich conversation, and your timely participation is required. The critical path is your reading – if you get into a schedule for your reading, the rest will follow.
3. Length is variable. One or two sentences is too short; the ideal is an engaging paragraph. This may be 150 to 250 words; for synthesizing posts, about fifty words longer.
4. Consistency matters. Participation is essential to success. Participation here is evidence of your focus and engagement. If you are focused and engaged, good things will happen for you, your fellow students, and for our classroom exploration.

In class, we will discuss what makes good blog entries. Here’s a summary of suggestions:
- **Audience**: Your audience (classmates and professor) is familiar with the readings and our discussions. Please assume that we are genuinely interested in your views.
- **Focus**: A compelling blog entry focuses on a specific idea and explores it in some depth. Choose an idea that you know is your own, one that is not based on a cliché, and does not present a broad generalization.
- **Specificity**: When possible and necessary use concrete examples from your readings to support your point.
- **Voice**: Use or (re)discover your own voice. We are all interested in your authentic and sincere response including the voice that comes with it.
- **Insight**: Use your personal reaction as a starting point but make sure that you offer your reader insights to how and why you came to know what you know and why your insight matters.

Learning Portfolio Assignment
At the end of the semester, you will be asked to create a portfolio of written work that represents your evolving thinking over the course of the semester. Because the learning portfolio is intended to be consciously and carefully selective, you should choose passages from your own writing, the writing of classmates, or that of authors you have come in contact with (no more than 1,000 words).

Then you will write a reflective essay (1,500-1,700 words) explaining what this collection as a whole means to you and how this portfolio reflects the changes in your thinking about material culture studies in general, about material culture within American history and society, and about your own intellectual journey over the course of this semester.

This final assignment will be due at 2:00 P.M. the day of our scheduled final, December 13.

In reviewing your essay, I will look for the following as they apply to the reflection prompts you choose:
- Critical analysis of why and how your thinking and writing about the subject of the course has changed or not changed.
- Evidence of your preparedness to take an active role as a participant in the discourse about American material culture, including accuracy of specific definitions, facts, and theories.
- Ability to connect the course material to other fields you have studied (and/or to your personal interests in different areas of your life including your plans for the future and/or your overall education)
- Depth and specificity of reflection
- Persuasiveness of your evidence-based argument
- Clear organization; engaging and comprehensible style; correct grammar and vocabulary

C. TERM PAPER (40%)
For this assignment, you will select a single object to critically examine. It can be anything you deem interesting, from the past to the present, and from furniture to clothing, dinnerware to bedding, light fixtures to appliances. The only requirement is that you must have a picture of the object to accompany your paper. Models of single-object analysis are found in the American Artifacts book, all of which emerged from a graduate level course that employed a similar methodological framework.

If you have trouble finding something to examine, go to one of the many antique or vintage stores in the area and look around. You will be bombarded with a variety of objects that should help stimulate your thinking.

1. Formal Analysis (10%) – Due Tuesday, September 25
   - Three pages, double-spaced with one-inch margins and a 12 point font.
   - For this assignment, you will formally analyze the object you have selected; you will translate what you see into a narrative description. In order to do so, you will want to pay careful attention to all the aspects of the object – material, spatial, and temporal – and your physical and emotional responses to it.
   - You must include an image of the object you selected.
   - This assignment requires no historical research—it focuses on close looking and verbal description.
   - If you are struggling, re-read Jules Prown’s “The Truth of Material Culture – Fact or Fiction” in American Artifacts, since it provides a template on how to look and what questions to ask when examining a material object.

2. Research Proposal (10%) – Due Tuesday, October 30
   - Three pages, double-spaced with one-inch margins and a 12-point font.
   - In this portion of the assignment, you want to entertain hypotheses concerning what your object signifies, or what it tells us about its historical and cultural context.
   - Of these hypotheses, choose the one you find most interesting or provocative and write about it. Then, think creatively about what research would be necessary to test your interpretative hypothesis, and prepare a research plan of action. This should include an annotated bibliography that contains two primary and two secondary sources.
   - You do not need to assert an argument here or prove a point. You simply want to explain the directions you are heading and the type of research you anticipate undertaking.

3. Analytical Paper (20%) – Due Tuesday, November 27
   - Five to seven pages, double-spaced with one-inch margins and a 12 point font.
   - This should be a polished, interpretive analysis of your object. This is not simply a matter of adding the previous assignments together with additional research. Your analysis should digest and develop you previous observations and research, and structure them according to an argument—a clearly worded claim defended by your formal analysis and historical research.
   - You will hand in your final analysis with the formal description and the research proposal.
D. Attendance and Class Participation (10%)

Attendance and active participation in class sessions are essential. This involves assuming the responsibility to speak thoughtfully and listen attentively. Such participation is, of course, only possible when you have done the week’s reading and are present in class. Class participation also includes group discussions and in-class writing assignments.

Please notify me in advance if you must be absent from class. Students may be excused from class if they present documentation (from the deans’ office or health services) for personal emergencies or illness within a week of the missed class. More than one unexplained absences will result in a reduction of your final grade. Students who miss four or more classes will fail the course. No exceptions.

E. Discussion Lead (10%)

Each student is required to act as a discussion leader once in the semester. This entails initiating and guiding a discussion of the readings and issues related to the topic of the day. Please provide a brief summary of the authors’ arguments and an outline of what you consider to be the key issues of the text. As discussion leader, you are expected to raise questions pertaining to the week’s readings and to foster lively discussion among the group as a whole. Please use images to illustrate your points and to stimulate discussion.

Course Grading

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Requirements</th>
<th>Weight</th>
<th>Due Date</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Discussion Lead</td>
<td>10%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Blog</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>Weekly</td>
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<tr>
<td>Term Paper</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>November 30</td>
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<tr>
<td>Learning Portfolio</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>December 13</td>
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<tr>
<td>Participation in class discussion based on readings, images, and lectures</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>Determined at end of semester</td>
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Papers will be evaluated with the following considerations in mind:

1. Point – Does the paper make a point? Is it carefully and clearly stated? Is it significant? Is it interesting and engaging for the reader? Does it take a stand and make an argument?
2. Structure – Is the paper well structured: does it include an introduction with a thesis? Paragraphs that defend and elucidate its thesis, as well as build a coherent and consistent argument? A conclusion that ties together the different ideas and themes? Are the individual paragraphs well structured, breaking points down into logical sub-points? Do they include a topic sentence that connects the theme of the paragraph to the other paragraphs and the thesis of the paper?
3. Argument and Evidence – Are the interpretive points of the argument fully discussed and well supported? Are there visual observations or texts that support the argument? Is the evidence well-chosen and appropriate? Does the discussion make the point clear with explanation and example where necessary, and explore the full implications of the claim being made?
4. Overall Depth of Thought – How well does the paper succeed at going beyond the surface of the text to notice and bring out underlying issues, particularly in a way that shows how the text/image/building might have something to say about our contemporary concerns? Does the paper wrestle with the complexities of the object and problems in interpretation?
**COURSE POLICIES**

A. ATTENDANCE
Class attendance and participation are very important and will be reflected in final 10% of your grade. Please arrive on time; latecomers can be disruptive. Students may be excused from class if they present documentation (from the deans’ office or health services) for personal emergencies or illness within a week of the missed class. More than one unexplained absences will result in a reduction of your final grade. Students who miss four or more classes will fail the course. No exceptions.

B. CELL PHONES AND LAPTOP COMPUTERS
It is a mark of courtesy to your fellow students and to me to turn all cell phones completely OFF during class. *Taking notes on a laptop computer is not encouraged. This is an image-intensive course and it is very easy to miss an important point if your eyes (and brain!) are trying to process the information on two (or more) screens. Better to stick with older technology – a notebook and pen.*

C. TERM PAPERS
All papers must be submitted on time to receive a passing grade. *No extensions will be granted.* All papers must be printed double-spaced, with proper footnotes or endnotes and bibliography that follow *The Chicago Manual of Style*, 15th ed., available in the library and summarized in *A Short Guide to Writing about Art*. Papers must be e-mailed as PDF or Word (.doc or .docx) attachments and must be received by the time noted with the due date. Be sure to put your name and email address on your papers. When submitting papers electronically also be sure to:

- **Save the file in Word with either the .doc or .docx extension**
- **Name the file clearly with your name—for example:**
  - *GeorgeCLOONEY_AMST210 Paper1.doc*

D. ACADEMIC INTEGRITY
The university has a recognized Honor Code, administered by the Honor Board. This code sets standards for academic integrity for all undergraduate students. As a student you are responsible for upholding these standards for this course. It is very important for you to be aware of the consequences of cheating, fabrication, facilitation, and plagiarism. To further exhibit your commitment to academic integrity, remember to sign the Honor Pledge on all examinations and assignments. For additional information on the Honor Code visit the Student Handbook web site: [http://www.wesleyan.edu/studentaffairs/studenthandbook/standardsregulations/studentconduct.html](http://www.wesleyan.edu/studentaffairs/studenthandbook/standardsregulations/studentconduct.html).

E. ACADEMIC ACCOMMODATIONS FOR STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES
It is the policy of Wesleyan University to provide reasonable accommodations to students with documented disabilities. Students, however, are responsible for registering with Disabilities Services, in addition to making requests known to me in a timely manner. If you require accommodations in this class, please make an appointment with me as soon as possible [during the 2nd week of the semester], so that appropriate arrangements can be made. The procedures for registering with Disabilities Services can be found at [http://www.wesleyan.edu/studentaffairs/disabilities/index.html](http://www.wesleyan.edu/studentaffairs/disabilities/index.html).
## COURSE OUTLINE

### I. WAYS OF SEEING

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>References</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>September 4</strong></td>
<td>Introduction to Material Culture</td>
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<td><strong>September 11</strong></td>
<td><strong>Formal Analysis: Looking at Crest Poles on the Northwest Coast</strong></td>
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<td>Jules Prown, “The Truth of Material Culture: History or Fiction?” in <em>American Artifacts</em></td>
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<td>Berlo and Phillips, 173-204.</td>
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<td><strong>September 18</strong></td>
<td><strong>“Reading” the Visual: Quilts</strong></td>
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<td><strong>September 25</strong></td>
<td><strong>Cultural Context: Gender on the Plains</strong></td>
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<td>Berlo and Phillips, 107-130</td>
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<td><strong>Style: Oscar Howe and Contemporary Native American Art</strong></td>
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<td>Berlo and Phillips, 209-234</td>
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<td><strong>Formal Analysis Due</strong></td>
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## II. **The Social Functions of Material Culture**

### October 2
**Documentation: Snapshots and Photograph Albums**

In Class Assignment: Bring in a photograph of a friend or family member that encapsulates his/her essence. Why? Show the image to someone else and copy her response. Compare reactions.


### October 9
**Commemoration: Gravestones and Death Photographs**


### October 16
**No Class – Fall Break**

### October 23
**Devotion: Retablos in Roman Catholic New Mexico**


October 30

Socialization: Samplers and American Womanhood

Kenneth Ames, “Words to Live By” in Death in the Dining Room: And Other Tales of Victorian Culture (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1992), 97-149. (ERES)


Research Proposal Due

III. Interpretive Lenses

November 6
Marketing Art: Pueblo Pottery in the Southwest


Marketing Art: Folk Portraits in the Early Republic

November 13
Constructing Gender: Dressing the Male Body


Constructing Gender: Dressing the Female Body

November 20
**Representing the Sacred: Picturing Christ**


Jesus 2000, National Catholic Reporter

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November 27
**The Politics of Light**
Weili Ye, “The Light of the Home: Dialectics of Gender in an Argand Lamp” in *American Artifacts*


Robyn Asleson, “Seduced by an Old Flame: Paradox and Illusion in a Late-Twentieth-Century Lucite Lighter” in *American Artifacts*

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Analytical Paper Due

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December 4
**Celebrating American Holidays in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction**


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Class Summary

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December 13  **Learning Outcome Assignment Due**