

# THE CULTURAL LIFE OF THINGS

It has been said that American culture is a culture obsessed with things — the “stuff” of everyday life, from the Harley Davidson and the iPod to the Dasani water bottle.

*This exhibition is presented in association with the American Culture Studies course “Reading Culture: The Cultural Life of Things,” in which students consider how a wide range of “things” — from the mass-produced to the rare — are imbued with cultural meanings, and how institutional and social forces have shaped an American culture of material objects. Student work will be informed by the approaches of several disciplines, including anthropology, literature, material culture, sociology, and museum studies.*

*This exhibition was organized by Heidi Kolk, director of writing courses and lecturer in American Culture Studies. The exhibition will be on display in the Teaching Gallery through April 21, 2008.*

Certainly, things have infiltrated our lives, especially now that a vast world of objects — holy relics, medieval manuscripts, Star Wars figures, used t-shirts — is so easy to access on the Internet. Consumption of these objects has become the most basic metaphor of American life.

Tempting as it is to say we live in “an age of things” (a phrase that was also often used in previous centuries to lament mass production and modernization), it is perhaps more accurate to speak of the present as a period in which our relationship to things is being wholly transformed. And yet, while this relationship seems so evident, things themselves are only half-considered, only vaguely understood.

*The Cultural Life of Things* explores the role that art — and in some cases the museum that houses it — plays in shaping our view of such things. It features works that are somehow concerned with the stuff of their time, from mundane and mass-produced objects to famed and highly collectible *objets d’art*. Some of these artworks manipulate everyday things, asking what they mean to us as a society and how we come to understand them. Others contemplate things of established value, holding them up for special study or reverence. A third group — which can overlap at times with the first two — includes things acquired as souvenirs or pursued as elements of a personal collection.

The elevated thing is a recurring motif in modernist art, and in this exhibition can be found in the work of Wayne Thiebaud, Andy Warhol, and Jim Dine. Each of these artists experiments with a commonplace object — something that, through frequent use, has become a recognizable, even trite element of modern culture. In the case of Warhol’s lithograph *Vote McGovern* (1972), the manipulation of Nixon’s image raises questions not only about how mass-produced images come to exert cultural influence, but how, in this process, the celebrity is transformed into a figure of special allure and cultural authority. In the context of this exhibition, we might also ask how (and why) Warhol’s work has in the last several decades become such an elevated object — a sacred “thing” in its own right.

Other works in the exhibition, among them those by Robert Rauschenberg, John Chamberlain, and Jean Dubuffet, elevate objects that appear to have been rejected or ignored, including scraps of metal, fragments of newspaper and cloth, and driftwood. These examples of “found” art resuscitate the lifeless or cast-off object, thereby reinhabiting lost or defunct cultural ideas.

In a very different way, Picasso’s *Vase* (1957) rejuvenates earlier forms, one of which we can see in the 6th-century Grecian *Amphora* next to which it has been situated in the gallery.

TEACHING GALLERY

MILDRED LANE KEMPER ART MUSEUM  
WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY IN ST. LOUIS

# THE CULTURAL LIFE OF THINGS

(con't)

Picasso inscribes an ancient or “primitive” object in an appropriative way – an action not unlike that of the collector who purchases an “exotic” foreign object to place on a shelf with others back home. In the case of the Grecian *Amphora*, the collector was Charles Parsons, a St. Louis banker who acquired hundreds of objects during his late-19th-century world travels, including the Japanese Netsuke figures, porcelain bowl, and lacquer boxes exhibited in the glass case, and several objects not on display, among them Samurai swords and Egyptian mummies. Parsons also collected paintings, and several of them – Sanford R. Gifford’s *Rheinstein* (1872–74) and Alexander Louis Leloir’s *The Kitten-Seller of Tunis* (1875), for example – offer a tourist’s view of the exotic or treasured cultural object. It is revealing to study the Parsons objects as expressions of one collector’s attitude toward things.

Considering the works from the Parsons collection together also reminds us that, to the collector, artworks – and their subject matter – have often been objects of special reverence, of a different kind of devotion than they typically receive now. It furthermore invites us to make unexpected visual associations: works that would rarely if ever be exhibited together “speak” to one another in their manner of conjuring cultural objects. For example, Leloir’s *Kitten-Seller* and Picasso’s *Vase* share an analogous fascination with the female form, and both seem to compare it to other objects of desire (kittens, pottery). Likewise, Michele Marieschi’s *Venetian Interior* (1730–35) is suggestively paired with Giovanni Battista Piranesi’s etching, *The View of the Via Appia Near Albano* (1764), and several other engravings that anatomize well-known European sites, in effect enshrining them for future tourist-collectors.

All the works in *The Cultural Life of Things* may be read on a number of levels – as beautiful or interesting “things” in their own right, certainly, but also as objects in private or, as in this forum, institutional collections; as artifacts of the culture that produced them; and as commentaries on the American love of things. They have been arranged to invite consideration of the status and purpose of objects in general, as well as our fundamental way of relating to them. Ultimately, these works show us how profoundly their context – their place in a given collection, their status as treasured possessions, their transformation from mere objects into *objets d’art* – affects the many cultural meanings of things.

– Heidi Kolk