

MATERIAL CULTURE: HOW THINGS REVEAL HISTORY

Material culture is the totality of physical, tangible objects created, used, left behind, and given meaning by a human society. These include **everyday objects** like tools, clothing, furniture, weapons, and utensils; **large-scale structures** like roads, cities, monuments, and buildings; and **art and expression** through paintings, sculptures, tattoos, and ceremonial items.

However, material culture is not just about the objects themselves, but what they reveal about human behavior. The material culture photographed and displayed by John Slemph in *Bomber Boys* gives us a visual representation of **immaterial culture**, in other words, the beliefs, values, laws, and social structures seen in the specific subculture of the United States Army Air Forces during World War II.

By learning history through material objects, rather than relying solely on written texts, we uncover distinct advantages.

Material Culture Bridges Gaps in the Historical Record:

Marginalized groups — such as enslaved people, the working class, and women — often left behind few written documents. Their physical possessions provide a direct record of their lived experiences. For eras or societies without widespread literacy, or whose culture was transmitted orally rather than through writing, physical artifacts are the primary source of historical evidence.

Material Culture Fosters Emotional Empathy and Connection:

Seeing a tangible object, such as the weathered leather of a WWII flight jacket, transforms abstract historical figures into real people who lived, feared, and created. Engaging with them tactilely or through the photographs in the book humanizes the past. Also, by engaging sensory experiences in the present moment, studying material culture gives multiple pathways to a deeper understanding of the past. Visceral connections to the daily realities of the past can be more fully understood through the weight of a tool, the texture of a fabric, or the scale of a building.

Material Culture Reveals Subconscious Cultural Values:

Written texts are often calculated, curated, or censored by those in power. Everyday objects reveal what a society *actually* valued, used, and discarded without the filter of political propaganda, potentially exposing unspoken truths. Physical artifacts chart the exact progression of human innovation, trade networks, and manufacturing capabilities over time, creating a tactile map of technological evolution.

Material Culture Study Enhances Critical Thinking and Analysis:

Analyzing an object requires a learner to develop unique analytical frameworks. By deducing an object's material origin, purpose, manufacturer, and user, they sharpen investigative and deductive reasoning skills. Perhaps most importantly, studying material culture naturally leads to cross-disciplinary learning: History blends with science (material degradation), art (design choices), and anthropology (cultural utility).