Historians are, by profession, suspicious of things. Words are our stock-in-trade. This is not to say, of course, that historians have never had recourse to nonlinguistic sources. From the use of archaeological evidence in the nineteenth century to Marc Bloch’s brilliant notion that the intricacies of medieval landholding patterns could be deciphered by observing the interwar French countryside from a small plane, historians have looked beyond the holdings of archives and libraries.¹ Scholars of the ancient, medieval, and early modern worlds, and of science and technology—those whose written sources are limited or whose very object is material—have pushed the evidentiary boundaries the furthest, although some modernists and social and cultural historians have also used visual, material, and musical sources.² Despite these initiatives, however, most historians view words as the most trustworthy as well as the most informative sources; everything else is merely illustrative or supplementary.

I will argue here, by contrast, that expanding the range of our canonical sources will provide better answers to familiar historical questions as well as change the very nature of the questions we are able to pose and the kind of knowledge we are able to acquire about the past. Each form of human expression has its unique attributes and capacities; limiting our evidentiary base to one of them—the linguistic—renders us unable to grasp important dimensions of human experience, and our explanations of major historical problems are thereby impoverished. Within the general category of the extralinguistic, I will make an argument for the utility and importance of material culture in particular.

In its broadest sense, material culture embraces the class of all human-made objects. This includes hand- and machine-made, unique and mass-produced, unique.

¹ Marc Bloch, La société féodale (Paris, 1939).
durable and ephemeral, expensive and cheap things. Given the breadth of that
definition and the vast range of objects that fall within it, I have limited the category
here in two ways: first, to goods “of style” or objects whose design involves aesthetic
considerations; and second, to three-dimensional objects with which people are in
bodily contact. The initial constraint removes purely functional parts (axles, ball
bearings, distributor caps), objects whose function must trump form (scalpels,
airplane fuselages, turkey roasters), and the accidental by-products of human life.
I have excluded these objects because, although their study is vitally useful for
reconstructing life processes in past times, they are not rich sources for grasping the
affective, communicative, symbolic, and expressive aspects of human life that are
central to the historical project. I would like to underscore, however, that this
constraint allows consideration not only of artisanal goods, but also of objects of
industrial design such as Tupperware, Bic pens, and Coke bottles.³

I have further limited my discussion here to those objects that are not just seen,
but also felt and touched (thereby distinguishing between visual and material
culture). These goods—whether jewelry or clothes that are worn, linen that is slept
upon, the chests that store that linen, plates or spoons from which food is eaten, or
furniture or housing that shelters—carry special weight in essentially all societies.
Even the objects used in everyday, repetitive embodied activities, such as eating or
grooming (to say nothing of ritual objects), are not simply functional; they are
always also modes of communication, or memory cues, or expressions of the psyche,
or extensions of the body, as well as sites of aesthetic investment, involving pleas-
ure, distress, or conscious indifference. Their makers and users understand them to
have special attributes not only because of their contact with the human body, but
because they themselves mirror two crucial characteristics of human existence.
They, like the people who use them, are embodied. That embodiedness means that
objects occupy space and cannot be in two places at once, and they are mortal,
although their life-spans may be much longer or shorter than those of the people
using them.

Working within this definition of the material, I will argue that there are three
major reasons why historians of all periods should be attentive to, and train
themselves in the use of, material culture. People have always used all five of their
senses in their intellectual, affective, expressive, and communicative practices. They
have, furthermore, used those senses differentially; sight, hearing, touch, taste, and
smell each provide certain kinds of information, and people create unique (and
non-interchangeable) forms in each of these sensorial domains.⁴ A symphony can-

³ For the utility of the distinction, see Henry Petroski, *The Evolution of Useful Things* (New York,
1992). For excellent examples of analysis of industrial design, see Paul Betts, *The Authority of Everyday
Objects* (Berkeley, Calif., 2004), and Alison J. Clarke, *Tupperware: The Promise of Plastic in 1950s

⁴ I am, therefore, following a different course, engaged in a different project, than either scholars
such as Jonathan Crary and Donald Lowe, who have attempted to historicize the ways in which people
have used their five senses, or those such as Martin Jay and Catherine Chalier, who have focused on
demonstrating the place attributed to each of the senses within particular bodies of thought. Jonathan
Crary, *Techniques of the Observer: On Vision and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge,
Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought* (Berkeley, Calif., 1993); Catherine
not be rendered visually; the aroma of roasting coffee cannot be put into words; the feeling of cashmere or burlap cannot be expressed in music. In the particular domain of concern here—material culture—sight and touch are the relevant senses, and objects, words, and images the relevant genres. I will argue that people’s relation to language is not the same as their relation to things; all that they express through their creation and use of material objects is, furthermore, not reducible to words. That particular relation to things means that even highly literate people in logocentric societies continue to use objects for a crucial part of their emotional, sensual, representational, and communicative expression. Artifacts, therefore, are differently informative than texts even when texts are available; texts, in fact, sometimes obscure the meanings borne by material culture. Thus, although work on clothing that limits its purview to the “fashion system” as constructed by the press, like that famously done by Roland Barthes half a century ago, is very illuminating, it is differently revelatory than melding such a discussion with an analysis of the clothing as worn (and as talked or written about by those who wore it). The three activities are so intimately interrelated as to be inseparable. Consumers’ acquisition, use, and discussion of clothing is shaped by their reading of fashion magazines—but only in part. People are also moved by associations of colors and textures, by the reading of fiction, by the viewing of visual culture beyond the press, and by the microdynamics of their communities. If historians thus limit their analyses of clothing either to the prescriptive literature or people’s self-conscious narrations of intent or to analysis of nonverbal clothing practices, they will miss a great deal.

Secondly, objects not only are the product of history, they are also active agents in history. In their communicative, performative, emotive, and expressive capacities, they act, have effects in the world. Without the crown, orb, and scepter, for example, a monarch is not a monarch. And not only do certain words uttered in a


8 For example, on the embodied and materialized nature of power in the French Old Regime, see
marriage ceremony transform two individuals into a couple, but in many traditions the rings exchanged are equally necessary. In a quite different domain, texts produced with movable type (as opposed to those that were handwritten or block printed) did not just reflect a change in technology; by their capacity to transmit uniform knowledge relatively cheaply and durably throughout the world, they themselves changed that world. They also changed it in another, more subtle way, however. The experience of reading a book that one knows to be identical to hundreds or thousands of others is not the same as holding a manuscript in your hands in which the individuality of the scribe is present in every letter. The possibility of imagining universal knowledge is augmented by the likeness of the physical form by which it is transmitted. Small innovations in goods, their design, or their aesthetic also structure people’s perceptions of the world, thereby changing that world. The undistorted and truly transparent glass that allowed a clear view from domestic to outside space, a product of techniques new in the nineteenth century, for example, allowed novel understandings of privacy and publicity. Finally, to offer one last example, in twentieth-century Europe, the style of a person’s clothing or home inevitably and inexorably located that person in society; the objects did not reflect as much as create social position (as well, some would argue, as the self itself).

Thirdly, most people for most of human history have not used written language as their major form of expression. They have created meaning, represented the world, and expressed their emotions through textiles, wood, metal, dance, and music. Material culture is simply another vital source of historical knowledge, supplemental to words for those who have had little access to them.

Engaging in such an analysis of material culture poses two interrelated sets of challenges. The first is theoretical and concerns the determination of how people relate to objects, and the second is methodological and involves the interpretation both of textual representations of the objects and of the objects themselves. That is, in order to determine an appropriate usage of the evidence of material culture for historical problems, one needs to understand the nature of the relation among words, images, and things, and all of those relations in particular historical contexts. One can then go on to the technical challenges of interpreting artifacts.

Let me start with the theorists who make the most universal claims about how people relate to things—scholars of the mind, including psychoanalysts, psychologists, and phenomenologically inclined philosophers. These scholars start with an


assumption that I accept, but I recognize that many historians do not—that there are certain traits shared by human beings across time and space resulting from our universal embodiedness. Because we are all born small and dependent, grow and mature relatively slowly, and eventually die, and because we exist in three dimensions and possess five senses, we share a relation to the material world. This literature suggests that one crucial shared attribute resulting from this form of embodiedness is a need for objects; human beings need things to individuate, differentiate, and identify; human beings need things to express and communicate the unsaid and the unsayable; human beings need things to situate themselves in space and time, as extensions of the body (and to compensate for the body’s limits), as well as for sensory pleasure; human beings need objects to effectively remember and forget; and we need objects to cope with absence, with loss, and with death.10 They argue that it is because things carry such affective weight that in essentially all societies, key transitional moments in the life of an individual and of a society—births, birthdays, coming-of-age ceremonies whether religious or secular, weddings, and deaths—are marked by the transmission of objects.

The work of psychoanalysts and psychologists on “transitional objects” is a particularly clear (and very familiar) example of how people use objects to cope with absence. Scholars of the mind discovered many years ago that the objects to which small children are utterly (and seemingly irrationally) attached—most famously Linus’s blanket in the Peanuts cartoon—serve a vital psychic function. The preferred object literally embodies the absent parents until the child is able to keep them securely present in his or her mind’s eye.11 Babies choose their own transitional objects, which are most often made from cloth, partially because fabric makes them soft, sensuously satisfying, comforting to sleep with, and convenient to carry, but also because it retains odors well. The panic generated by the (even temporary) loss of these objects is such that parents become as obsessed with them as their children and look forward to the time when they will no longer be needed. It is not, however, so certain that people ever really outgrow their need to incarnate in objects those they love. Rather than disappearing with time, these materializations of love objects change form. At a later moment in childhood, for example, it is not uncommon for that objectification to shift from a stuffed animal or rag possessed by the child to something worn by the parent. Ethnographer Patrizia Ciambelli’s report of one woman’s memory of her father’s ring is exemplary: “My father never took it off. I remember night-time drives when I was in the back seat of the car; each time a car would pass us I would see the shine of the diamond on his ring. It was, it was . . . it was, my father, voilà.”12 And adult psyches facing permanent loss by death often lodge the mourned person in his or her left-behind clothing. The psychoanalysts Serge Tisseron and Yolande Tisseron-Papetti describe

10 Many texts could be cited here. In addition to those cited above and below, see Helga Ditterman, The Social Psychology of Material Possessions: To Have Is to Be (Hemel Hempstead, 1992). From a psychoanalytic perspective, see Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok, L’Ecorce et le noyau (Paris, 1987), and Serge Tisseron, Comment l’esprit vient aux objets (Paris, 1999). A quite different reading of Freud can be found in Adrian Forty’s introduction to Adrian Forty and Susanne Küchler, eds., The Art of Forgetting (Oxford, 1999).
how a patient—a man widowed long before—had hidden his dead wife’s coats away in a closet. He left them untouched for years, but at a particular point in the mourning process, he opened the closet and tried on the coats. Tisseron and Tisseron-Papetti argue that the physical contact with the fabric that had clothed his wife not only reconnected him to her, but also made him whole again: “Because the emotions tied to the lost person are no longer held in the psyche but deposited in certain parts of the surrounding world and melded with those objects, they do a great deal more than to fix a memory. They reunite, inextricably combined, the lost person and the part of the self that had been in contact with her.”13 This is an ambivalent relation, however. Humans expect things to outlive us, embodying and carrying a trace of our physical selves into a future in which we are no longer present. At the same time, the continued existence of intimately used objects—clothing, pens, eyeglasses, jewelry, toothbrushes—after the death or disappearance of their owner can be both cruel and comforting. In the immediate, they move us to tears; in the long term, they provide a sensory experience of continued contact. The rings I never take off that belonged to my dead grandmothers provide a daily connection to them, as if our fingers could still touch. An account in a novel of a forsaken lover taking a pair of scissors to the closet full of left-behind clothes is an economical, and instantly comprehensible, way for an author to communicate the character’s depth of rage and despair.

Having the opportunity to touch, caress, wear a dead loved one’s things may help a patient suffering from the melancholia of unresolved mourning to come to terms with definitive absence. Experiences come to be lodged in things; loss of the object-companion of an experience, therefore, can bring the loss of the memory itself. Thus people deprived of their things may be severed from their pasts, and from their dead. Those pasts, and those dead, do, of course, live on in memory, but a dematerialized memory is both very fragile and also less satisfying to human beings—who are, after all, of flesh and blood.14 Even in literate societies, people use (and need) three-dimensional objects, as well as familiar sights and smells, as memory cues, as souvenirs in a quite literal sense.15

While intimate things are crucial objectifications of intimate relations, the space in which they are housed is equally fundamental. As Frances Yates and, very differently, Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Henri Bergson have eloquently demonstrated, memories are often literally housed, with dwellings and the objects they contain providing the key to remembrance.16 The power of homes to connect the

13 Yolande Tisseron-Papetti and Serge Tisseron, L’érótisme du toucher des étoffes (Paris, 1982), 86.
14 As Sarah Kofman movingly put it in her memoir in reference to the last sign of life of her father—a card written in French by someone else in Drancy—“When my mother died, it wasn’t possible to find that card, which I had reread so often and wanted to save. It was as if I had lost my father a second time. From then on nothing was left, not even that lone card he hadn’t even written.” Sarah Kofman, Rue Ordener Rue Labat, trans. with an intro. by Ann Smock (Lincoln, Nebr., 1996), 9.
present with the past lies in the repetition of the small gestures of everyday routine, done with the help of particular objects. The making of coffee, for example, performed unthinkingly every morning for years, can suddenly become profoundly evocative when the gesture conjures the presence of a person no longer there. Likewise, a child’s toy brings to mind a moment forgotten. The winter light illuminating a sofa reminds the dweller of a conversation three years earlier. The presence of these physical objects, of the bodily routines, of the light and the smells of a home, enables the conjuring of memories inscribed in those places, sensory impressions, connection to the past, and even identity in the present.17 Things are not just things, and a physical home is more than that. Thus, historians seeking to understand the meanings of migration, of war, of natural disaster, and even of urban renewal may find in the evidence of things a guide to how such events were lived by their protagonists. Struggles against the loss of even terribly dilapidated unsafe housing, claims for restitution of lost homes and lost property, and the risks that refugees took to carry “mere” things with them would be more accurately interpreted if historians took the psychological meanings of objects and homes more seriously.

It is not only historians of disruption, uprooting, or catastrophe who would find that buildings and objects speak, however, but also those of such diverse domains as work, domesticity, and political identification and transformation. In *La poétique de l’espace*, Gaston Bachelard argues that it is labor and consciousness that bring objects to life. The labor can be that of a housewife polishing a piece of furniture or of a poet describing it. “From one object to another in the bedroom, housewifely care weaves together the very distant past and the new day. The housewife awakens the sleeping furniture.”18 Bachelard’s work suggests that the history of mechanization and the division of labor—whether in the home or the workshop/factory—would look quite different if one took the objects of that labor seriously. I have suggested elsewhere, for example, that attentiveness to how nineteenth-century French artisans related to the things they made reveals them to have been as preoccupied with the sensuousness of the labor process and the beauty of their creations as with the conditions of that labor. This observation then required a reconsideration of the history of workers’ interests and identities.19 Likewise, understanding the world of domestic service, which often seems to be better grasped by novelists than by historians, might be easier if one researched not only the relation between servants and mistresses, but also servants and the domestic

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things they animated through their labor. The history of domesticity itself, particularly of the housewife and the mechanization of labor in the home, would be a richer one if, in addition to consideration of expenditures of time, physical force, and standards of cleanliness, historians thought harder about the change in the relation to time, to space, and to bodies brought about by the replacement of the broom by the vacuum cleaner and other improvements that distanced domestic labor from the objects of its attention.

Finally, both group identification and political consolidation and action are enabled by people’s relation with things. Psychologists and sociologists have demonstrated how people “read” style and gesture to recognize those who are like and unlike, to identify and differentiate. These insights have important ramifications for historians striving to understand collective action. Timothy Breen has recently argued, for example, that the American Revolution was in fact a consumer revolution, made possible by a shared relationship to goods among the American colonists in the two decades preceding the war. And historian Neil Kamil, writing about an earlier moment in North American history, makes a powerful case in *Fortress of the Soul* for the transmission of a Huguenot identity across the Atlantic, and its maintenance in the New World, through a distinctive domestic aesthetic. While the work of theorists of the mind is vital to understanding the relation between people and things in general or that which is universal in that relationship, the writing of social and political theorists is crucial to grasping its historicity. Transformations in the nature of capital, as well as of the organization of the relations of production, distribution, and consumption, necessarily alter people’s relations to things and how things mediate relations among people. Here the work of Marx and Marxian theorists, as well as some of their critics, is invaluable. These theorists argue persuasively for the decreased meaning of labor and a distancing of workers from the product of that labor in a moment of its division and mechanization, as well as for a more systemic change in how people relate to others and to things under capitalism. Given, however, that neither socioeconomic nor political systems completely saturate (or determine) humans’ relations to the material world, it is the work of those scholars who attempt to meld analysis of the human and the historical in the domain of the material that is most precious to historians. Walter Benjamin is perhaps the theorist who is cited most often in this context. His work grapples with how the affective, communicative, and sensual


uses to which all humans arguably put things is shaped by (a particular moment of) capitalism.

Work inspired by Marx is essential to understanding the implications of shifts in the nature of capital for the relation of people and things, but it is of less assistance in the domain of political organization. Monarchical, imperial, republican, democratic, fascist, and socialist forms of state all use objects and style to constitute and reinforce their power, but they do so very differently. Scholars of monarchy, for example, have shown that kings used a very careful regulation of ostentation to control powerful political actors (most often nobles and clerics) over whom they had limited coercive power. The aesthetic choices of the vast majority were of irrelevance to them, since they played no role in the political process, but the color of a duke’s cloak was, by contrast, of the greatest import. Under democratic or republican regimes, when the polity was to include all citizens of the nation, material culture came to be understood as an important means of unifying that national body and distinguishing it from others. Likewise, colonial regimes had their own object systems. Anthropologists such as Jean and John Comaroff, Bernard Cohn, and Nicholas Thomas have demonstrated, for example, that material culture plays a particularly explicit role in negotiations and struggle between ruler and ruled in colonial contexts. Colonial administrations demonstrate their understandings of the nature of the relationship (current and future) of metropole and colony in how they mark difference through the style of everyday life. In parallel, indigenous peoples stake out positions through their compliance with, or refusal of, such aesthetic boundaries.

The use of material culture for the writing of history entails, therefore, the use of both theoretical or conceptual work that addresses the relation between people and things in the abstract, and that which focuses on those relations under particular forms of economy and polity. It also requires careful reflection on the relation of texts and things, how people have represented their object worlds in writing or used textual invocations of objects. In this domain, it is literary scholars who provide the greatest assistance. Those analysts have themselves been inspired, at least in part, by the observation that while novelists and poets have always had recourse to descriptions and evocations of things, it is at moments of radical transformation of systems of production, distribution, and consumption that objects loom particularly large. From the object-saturated work of Honoré de Balzac,
Émile Zola, Marcel Proust, Francis Ponge, and Georges Perec, to cite a few authors from the French canon, scholars have derived a great deal about historical changes in how people relate to things. Rachel Bowlby’s and Naomi Schor’s analyses of the representation of consumer culture in Zola, Mieke Bal’s and Angelika Corbineau-Hoffmann’s work on objects in Proust, and Benjamin on Charles Baudelaire are only four of the many examples one could cite.27

While literary scholars focus on the textualization of things, art historians have done crucial work in analyzing their pictorialization. Visual representations of objects are useful to historians in two very different ways. The objects themselves have often disappeared, leaving the historian with only their traces in drawings, paintings, prints, photographs, and film. And even when the things have survived, they have almost inevitably been detached from their context, preserved in a museum or antique shop, or put to a new use in someone’s home. Visual representations provide the historian with mediated access to the relationships among objects—how furniture was arrayed in a room, for example, whether an interior was stylistically unified or varied, or what pieces of clothing were worn simultaneously—and some possibility of imagining how they were used. The mediation of the painter, photographer, or filmmaker, like that of the writer, both enriches and complicates the historian’s work. That mediation produces the second utility of visual representations of objects to historians. If read as a literal depiction of someone’s home, a seventeenth-century Dutch domestic scene will almost certainly mislead; if, by contrast, both the painting and the objects represented are subject to analysis, the painting will be as valuable a source as a perfectly preserved dwelling. The fact that a room was painted at all, the contents of that room, the relation of light and shadow, choices of color, use of perspective, the references to other representations of interiors, the placement of people within the space—all provide crucial insights into the relation of people and things at the time the picture was painted. The focus of much art historical work has been precisely on deciphering and interpreting those representational decisions. Finally, the meaning of style, the relation between aesthetically invested objects and society, and the relation of the verbal and nonverbal has long preoccupied art historians. This work is invaluable in providing a means of or an apparatus for reflection on what makes a “style” (and if the concept is, in fact, a useful one) and how styles change under different conditions of production, distribution, and consumption of aestheticized objects.

While the work of theorists and literary and visual scholars is very helpful in understanding the place of objects and their representation, it is archaeologists, anthropologists, curators, and historians of art, architecture, and design who have elaborated sophisticated strategies for analyzing aesthetically inflected things.

Art historian, curator, and well-known scholar of material culture Jules D. Prown has divided those who study material culture into two groups, the farmers and the cowmen. The farmers are preoccupied with the “material” side of material culture, the age, substance, and structure of the object, its provenance, its authenticity. The cowmen engage more deeply with the “culture” side of material culture and try to determine the meanings embedded in and transmitted by the objects in question. While Prown himself argues that both kinds of knowledge are needed if the past is to be understood, and that those who focus on the material should also engage the cultural and vice versa—and I agree with that argument—there is truth to the dichotomy. Archaeologists and anthropologists focus on using the object to understand the society of which it is a product. Most curators and some design historians, architectural historians, and historians of the decorative arts view the core of their work as establishing the material truth of the object, while others in those fields would argue that in the domain of aesthetic objects, society and object are so intertwined that one must inevitably attempt to simultaneously establish the truth of the object and its social meaning and place. Historians have much to borrow from all of these disciplines, but those borrowings will necessarily differ according to the mission and constraints of each field.

Archaeology is the discipline whose use of things is closest to that of history. The primary goal of both archaeologists and historians is to understand, by whatever means possible, a given society. Both, therefore, study objects not to explain those objects but to glean from them something about the people who designed, made, distributed, and used them. It is undoubtedly that shared preoccupation that has facilitated the already long-established collaboration among ancient and medieval historians and archaeologists. Historians of all epochs, however, have an enormous amount to learn from archaeology. In part, no doubt, because their data is so difficult to unearth and to interpret, archaeologists have had recourse to highly sophisticated techniques to determine the age, origin, and probable use of their objects of investigation. They are among the freest and most constrained scholars of the material world. They are free in that the fragmentary nature of the archaeological record of very ancient cultures leaves them the obligation and possibility of imaginative interpretation. They are constrained, however, by those same characteristics, and dependent upon advances in other fields—geology, anatomy, and physics, to name only three. Archaeologists tend, therefore, to move between the very concrete and the very abstract. On the one hand, they have elaborated complex scientific protocols for analysis of the material remnants of past societies—protocols that detail modes of uncovering, documenting, transporting, dating, and analyzing the objects found. On the other hand, the discipline is the site of highly abstract theorizing about cultural production and transmission and human

evolution. Historians can productively borrow both the technical and theoretical advances of this field and can equally constructively turn to anthropology for another kind of help interpreting things.

Anthropologists—because exchange has been so central a conceptual category in the discipline, because of their focus on symbolic systems, and, finally, because the written, and in some cases the spoken, word is relatively marginal in many of the societies in which they work—have long engaged material culture seriously. Marcel Mauss remains a key reference, given particularly that his work raised fundamental issues of both exchange and embodiedness. The work of Igor Kopytoff and Arjun Appadurai on rethinking the concept of the commodity, and of Daniel Miller on the meanings of consumption under capitalism, usefully challenges preconceptions concerning the meaning of goods in capitalist and noncapitalist societies. In a very different vein, Janet Hoskins’s insights concerning the place of objects in the telling of life histories, and those of Paul Stoller on the importance of the senses, provide crucial signposts for reflection on the embodiment of people and things.

Historically, curators of the decorative arts and design historians have produced erudite and invaluable monographs on individual artisans as well as volumes on stylistic developments. Because the focus is on explaining the aesthetic logic of the objects as well as reconstructing their biography and often establishing the lifetime production of their maker, these works discuss the world beyond the object only when the object is explicitly shaped by external events. Even the most internalist of design histories or exhibition catalogues, however, provide not only vital information about a particular genre, its practitioners, and its market, but also an equally important lesson in how to glean information from the glaze on a pot, the curve on a chair leg, the stitch used in an embroidery, or the fabric in a quilt.

The last twenty years have seen vastly increased interest among design historians in using material culture to read society. For example, Adrian Forty’s now classic text Objects of Desire explicates not only why the objects he analyzed look as they do, but what that appearance tells us about the dynamics of industrialization. Curator Susan Pearce’s work has fundamentally altered understandings of authenticity in museum studies, and both the Journal of Design History and the interdisciplinary revue the Journal of Material Culture, which first appeared in 1996, largely devoted to encouraging work at the intersection of history, anthropology, and design, have published crucial contributions to this discussion. A particularly

29 For a summary of the current place of theory in archaeology, see the essays gathered in Ian Hodder, ed., Archaeological Theory Today (Cambridge, 2001), and Christopher Carr and Jill E. Neitzel, eds., Style, Society and Person: Archaeological and Ethnological Perspectives (New York, 1995).
34 Adrian Forty, Objects of Desire: Design and Society from Wedgwood to IBM (New York, 1986).
lively domain of research is design in the former Soviet Union and Eastern Bloc countries, as well as the changes there since 1989–1991. In an interesting parallel to the work on colonialism, scholars in these fields tell us as much about the workings of power under that regime as about the forms of the goods themselves.36

Architectural historians, from the work of Siegfried Giedion in the 1940s through to the present in such diverse domains as the vernacular architecture of the American South, the structuring and practice of French justice, and the dynamics of colonial power, have made powerful claims for the imbrication of the built environment and the society in which and for which it was constructed. Katherine Fischer Taylor has demonstrated the ways in which the French judicial system was instantiated in the courtroom.37 Architectural historians specializing in American vernacular architecture have persuasively demonstrated that two forms understood to characterize American dwellings—the shotgun house and the front porch—were originally African imports, brought by slaves, and thereby contribute crucial evidence to arguments for the creole nature and racial hybridity of American culture.38 In the domain of colonial history, differences among European conceptions of colonial rule, and their postcolonial effects, have been clarified through investigation of architectural interventions in each nation-state’s empire.39

Moving from this overflight, I would now like to offer two examples of historical problems for which the interplay of things and words offers crucial insights. These two cases, furthermore, although separated by a century and a half, both analyze things used within the home in the course of everyday life. They are exemplary, therefore, of the argument made above concerning not only the importance of things to people, but the imbrication of objects, space, and place. The first case focuses on the political use of things during the French Revolution. It examines a discursive silence and material presence in order to suggest a rethinking of the nature of the relation between politics and the private sphere during the revolutionary decade. The second takes a discursive volubility in the context of material loss to shed light on how those defined as Jews by the Nazi and Vichy regimes used goods in their attempts to mourn their past lives and envisage a future in the fall of 1944.

ONE OF THE MANY RADICAL INNOVATIONS ascribed by historians to political actors in the decade following the taking of the Bastille in 1789 is the politicization of everyday life.40 According to this interpretation, French revolutionaries attempted to republicanize everything, from clothing, to language, to song, to the days of the week, to the names of streets and of children.41 A reading of the scholarship in the history of the decorative arts of this period provides a sharply contrasting image. The vast majority of work on furniture, porcelain, tapestry, and silver slides rather quickly over the Revolution, stating at most that no republican style was created, and that what production there was, was simply derivative of the court styles of the Old Regime. A careful analysis of both the discourse around material culture and the goods produced in these years reveals a more complex story, a story that sheds light on how the division between public and private was constructed during the revolutionary decade.

The historians who emphasize radical change in the everyday are right in that within the space of a few years, French citizens were told that they were to speak a different language, to hear and sing new kinds of music, and to wear different clothing. French people no longer went to church, their roads and towns had unfamiliar names, the boundaries of their départements were newly demarcated, their weeks had ten days, their months had a novel nomenclature, and new forms of architecture were hotly debated. Further investigation of both material culture and discursive sources will reveal, however, that French citizens did not find all aspects of their material and everyday lives transformed or even discussed. Aside from the quiet commissioning of furniture for the National Convention, interiors, whether of public or private buildings, went largely unmentioned.42

The revolutionaries’ definitively documented preoccupation with clothing style, on the one hand, and architecture, on the other, renders this silence particularly intriguing.43 Why attempt to change clothing and the built environment, and not furniture and the other arts of the home? Clothing, architecture, furniture, tapestry, and porcelain are objects with great symbolic capacities; all, in fact, were used by crown and court in the Old Regime to augment their power. I would like to suggest here that this silence on the subject of interior decoration was not simply a result of the brevity of the revolutionary period or of the destruction of the court system,


43 There are large literatures on both topics. An excellent recent study on clothing is Richard Wrigley, The Politics of Appearances: Representations of Dress in Revolutionary France (Oxford, 2002); on architecture, James A. Leith, Space and Revolution: Projects for Monuments, Squares and Public Buildings in France, 1789–1799 (Montreal, 1991), is still the essential text.
as many have suggested, although both were indeed salient. That silence was as much a symptom of the revolutionaries’ understanding of the relative importance of the public and the private for political life. Equally noteworthy is the fact that despite the lack of discursive interest, a substantial quantity of self-consciously republican, revolutionary furniture, porcelain, objets d’art, and tapestries was designed, made, purchased, and used. There is, in other words, a discursive absence and a material presence to be explained. First the absence.

At first glance, one might think that the explanation for revolutionaries’ unusual silence lies in the material conditions of the relevant crafts; perhaps there was just no time to redesign furniture, porcelain, silver, and tapestries, or perhaps no labor or raw materials were available. Why waste time discussing something one cannot change? The wide-ranging debate on architecture, however, particularly monumental architecture, belies that hypothesis. The examples need not be limited to architecture; revolutionary legislators, journalists, and pamphleteers were voluble on a fantastic array of topics concerning republican design and everyday life, whether practicable or not.

A shared characteristic of all of the topics of intensive revolutionary debate was that they could be understood to concern primarily the public world, the world outside the home. Revolutionary-era efforts to reform dress and architecture might appear to contradict this generalization, but it was, in fact, the public manifestations of clothing and building that were the focus of discussion. Most famously, the painter Louis David, when responding to the call for designs for republican dress, concentrated his efforts on defining the differences in attire among those holding various public offices. Discourses on republican clothing had very little to say about how it might influence familial relations, between either wives and husbands or parents and children. And, in contrast to feminist dress-reform efforts of the next century, there was no interest in an increase in individual freedom of movement or practicality. Changes in the regulation and appearance of clothing were intended to promote—at different moments of the Revolution—liberty of choice or collective identification or political values.

Revolutionary-era architectural projects were, similarly—unless they concerned buildings to which the public would have access—preoccupied mainly with the facades, and with the exteriors more generally. Texts did not discuss, again as later ones would, how living in a dwelling in which space was differently allocated or with a different relation to the outside world might help form republican subjects or inculcate a sense of national belonging. This is not only a textual omission; in the thousands of extant architectural drawings, little attention was paid to conveying a detailed and powerful sense of the experience of the interior of private buildings. The built environment, like clothing, mattered largely insofar as it shaped people’s public, collective experience.

It is therefore no accident that the only furnishings actually commissioned by the

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44 On David’s designs, see Hunt, “Symbolic Forms of Political Practice.”
45 In addition to the above references, see Lynn Hunt, “Freedom of Dress in Revolutionary France,” in Sara E. Melzer and Kathryn Norberg, eds., From the Royal to the Republican Body (Berkeley, Calif., 1998), 224–250.
46 From the later period, see, for example, Eugène Viollet-le-Duc, Histoire d’un maison (Paris, 1873), and César Daly, L’architecture privée au XIXe siècle sous Napoléon III (Paris, 1864).
revolutionary government were for public buildings, ranging from legislative bodies, through schools, city halls, and libraries. The furnishing of citizens' everyday life was of little concern, both because of the liberal separation between a public sphere of state intervention and a private sphere of individual liberty, and because it was not understood to matter politically. The elaboration of a model of a solidaristic public polity resting on a culturally unified private nation would happen gradually over the course of the nineteenth century. The grandchild of the Revolution—the Third Republic—would therefore come to take a great interest in the political and social signification of all of its inhabitants' dwellings. Despite this lack of official interest in the populace's domestic interiors, however, objects with a clear republican and/or revolutionary theme were, in fact, created and acquired.

Revolutionary-era innovations can be found in all of the arts of the home; from 1789 onward, artisans turned out furniture, decorative plaques, porcelain, pottery, draperies, wallpaper, and knickknacks, either in unornamented indigenous raw materials (emphasizing the principle of equality and patriotism) or decorated with republican symbols, events, and texts. In the domain of furniture, “republican” design was characterized by solid wood (rather than veneer), indigenous and relatively inexpensive materials (instead of exotic woods and precious stones and metals), and marquetry inlays of Phrygian caps, pikes, and revolutionary texts. Not only did indigenous wood replace imported wood in these pieces, but it was often left in a relatively natural state. While this was no doubt due in part to the constraints posed by wartime austerity, it was coherent with the revolutionaries' valorization of nature. Even if inlay of gemstones or exotic woods or bronzes were too closely associated with court and crown and too costly for the period, the nakedness and humbleness of the wood could have been hidden under paint or colored varnish—neither of which was an expensive technique. In parallel, while carved and turned elements became relatively rare, if present they were used to depict revolutionary scenes and emblems, as can be seen in the chair in Figure 1, whose form is Louis XVI, but which is decorated with the revolutionary symbols of sickles and a sheaf of wheat. This chair was clearly destined for a wealthy consumer eager to show affiliation with the Revolution but not willing to give up luxury to do so; unlike most of the furniture from this epoch, it is crafted from imported mahogany and elegantly upholstered. The enthusiasm of those with means during the revolutionary years for quotidian, domestic reminders of revolutionary principles can also be seen in the cup and saucer in Figure 2. This set was made of fine porcelain, with the surface decoration of the union of the clergy, nobility, and Third Estate painted in gold. The plate shown in Figure 3, by contrast, would have enabled either a modest household to be reminded of and display republican

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47 On this point, see Auslander, Taste and Power, pt. III; Lisa Tiersten, Marianne in the Market: Envisioning Consumer Society in Fin-de-Siècle France (Berkeley, Calif., 2001); Silverman, Art Nouveau in Fin-de-Siècle France.

48 For further evidence of these objects, see the holdings of the Musée Carnavalet and the Musée de la Révolution française; they can also be found scattered through other French museums and private collections. See also Colin Lucas, ed., Re-writing the French Revolution (Oxford, 1991), 69–118; Pierre Arizzoli-Clémental et al., Aux armes et aux arts! Les arts de la Révolution, 1789–1799 (Paris, 1988); George Levitine, ed., Culture and Revolution: Cultural Ramifications of the French Revolution (College Park, Md., 1989); Michel Beurdeley, La France à l'encan 1789–1799: Éxode des objets d'art sous la Revolution (Paris, 1981).
sentiments or a wealthier one to inhabit a more egalitarian interior. Finally, some of these objects transcended the public/private divide; the fan in Figure 4, for example, which provided the lyrics and music to a revolutionary song on the side.

held toward the body while the other depicted couples in popular dress, could have been used as a crib sheet in public gatherings and as a visual and tangible reminder of the Revolution within the home.

Figure 2: Porcelain Cup and Saucer: “Union” or the “Three Orders,” 1789. Produced in Limoges. Musée Adrien Dubouche, Limoges, France. Photograph by Guy Gendraud. Reproduced by permission of Réunion des Musées Nationaux/Art Resource, New York.
The motivation for the production of these objects—generally anonymous—is difficult to establish with certainty. It is likely, however, given the very high rates of revolutionary participation by artisans in the decorative arts industries, that many
of these objects reflect the convictions of their makers. Producers did not necessarily have the time or the resources to engage in a thorough redesign of their goods, but they wanted, nonetheless, to make them conform to republican principles. One of the styles they had mastered in the last years of the Old Regime, neoclassicism, was, in its references to the Roman republics and Greek democracies, perfectly compatible with current political views. When those forms were inscribed with revolutionary emblems, they became even more appropriate for politically active producers. Artisans would not, however, have made these goods if no one wanted to buy them. But who would want such things? Although they were far less luxurious than furnishings and decorative items from the late Old Regime or the Directory, the purchase of such durable and encumbering, yet fragile, items in the middle of revolutionary upheaval suggests both means and a very powerful commitment to republican principles. Furniture, porcelain, fans, and wallpaper innocent of explicit political meaning were available, and consumers could have simply continued using their prerevolutionary domestic goods. It would appear, therefore, on the basis of the evidence of material culture that at least some French citizens took the politicization of everyday life further than did those writing revolutionary law and political tracts, making their domestic interiors stylistically compatible with the political moment in which they were participating.
This case demonstrates that the most nuanced and richest account of the symbolic dynamics of the French Revolution will be found by melding the approaches of the historian, the decorative arts historian, and the specialist in material culture. Historians’ training in the reading of political treatises and action, knowledge of economic and social transformations, and attentiveness to symbolic manifestations across genres as various as fêtes, songs, and clothing are vital. Equally necessary, however, is the specialist knowledge of individual objects produced by historians of the decorative arts. Finally, those who work in the domain of material culture will lend a concern with embodiment and with the particular work done by each form of the material. A very different moment of transition in French history—between the Occupation and Vichy regimes and the return of republicanism—provides a second example of the relation of the material and the discursive.

One of the challenges facing historians of European Jewry in the decade following World War II is to understand how survivors who stayed in Europe—particularly those who returned “home,” to polities and societies that had, at minimum, cooperated in their persecution—were able to rebuild their lives. The case of French Jews is particularly striking. French Jews, whether citizens or foreigners, wealthy or poor, religious or secular, had been convinced before the war that their place in France was secure and that the French state would protect them.49 That integration into the fabric of French life can be read, in part, from the styles they chose for their literal homes.

Whether bourgeois or poor, modernist or historicist, the homes of Parisian Jews in the immediate prewar period very much resembled the homes of non-Jews of their same class, profession, and neighborhood. Most bourgeois Parisian homes, whether Jewish or not, were furnished largely in the style I have called elsewhere “historicist pastiche.”50 For example, the home of Mme Blitz, née Ayoun, at 18, avenue de la République in the 11th arrondissement of Paris, is typical of a certain kind of bourgeois dwelling. Her living room was furnished with a contemporary matched set of upholstered armchairs and sofa, a gaming table, a display cabinet, a set of nesting tables, and a woman’s writing desk, all in Louis XV style. The only modernist object was a Lalique vase, and the only non-French items were two Chinese vases and the Oriental carpets. Likewise, M. and Mme Léon Adler’s home was almost entirely Old Regime in style, including the engravings on the wall, although they also had a bronze by the Third Republican sculptor and caster Barbedienne, a pair of Empire candlesticks, and one Louis Philippe desk. By

contrast, the Azerman household was (with the exception of the maid’s room) modernist from floor to ceiling, from the children’s room to the salon. Parisians of all classes who, like the Azermans, were engaged in the decorative, fine, or everyday arts as producers, distributors, or consumers tended to express that engagement through modernist interiors. In all cases, Parisian Jews invested affect, time, and money in the creation of domestic interiors that they judged to be appropriate to their profession, their class, and the nation in which they were making their lives.51

Given this sense of belonging and attachment to their dwellings, the necessity for virtually all Parisian Jews to leave their homes sometime between 1940 and 1944 came as a great shock. Even more stunning to them was French complicity in their persecution. After the liberation of Paris in the summer of 1944, however, despite that complicity, the vast majority of Parisian Jewish returnees sought to come home in the strongest sense of that word. They hoped to be reunited with family and friends, and to recuperate their dwellings, their personal possessions, their employment, and in some cases their citizenship. They dreamt of a return to normalcy, of simply picking up their lives where they had left off. Some also hoped for acknowledgment of the injustice of having been persecuted simply for falling into the category of “Jew."

In many ways, their homecoming proved disappointing. Rather than a warm welcome and compensation for wartime injustices, they found their belonging in their homeland (whether native or adopted) questioned, their passports marked with a large red “R,” and their literal homes emptied and occupied by others. Most, nonetheless, tried to make a new place for themselves in France. While retracing their route to economic recovery is possible through the tools of social history, it is more difficult to grasp the mechanisms of their psychological and emotional healing. My research on this question in France has suggested to me, very unexpectedly, that an important step in that process was mourning their lost lives through petitioning the provisional government for restitution of the contents of their homes that had been stolen by the German army during the war. Most of these furnishings had been shipped east, but a substantial portion had been abandoned by the Germans as they left Paris during the spring of 1944. In the autumn of that year, the provisional government, faced with immiserated Jewish returnees and goods clearly confiscated from them, created the Service de Restitution des Biens Spoliés (the Office of Restitution of Pillaged Goods, or SRBS) to attempt to reunite these domestic goods with their erstwhile owners. The warehouses and boxcars of unshipped household goods were installed in display rooms. Returnees were notified of the existence of these furnishings and of the procedures for recuperation by a combination of word of mouth, posters, and circulars. In an effort to prevent fraud, returnees (or their representatives) seeking to reclaim goods were asked to write a letter explaining their situation, to submit a precise inventory of the contents of their home at the moment of their departure, and to provide a confirmation from the concierge, owner, or manager of the building that the goods had indeed been confiscated. At the same time, the SRBS made every effort to avoid false hopes. It stated, in the clearest of terms, that unless the dwelling had been pillaged in late

51 Archives Nationales, Paris, Series AJ 38, carton 5909 for all these dossiers.
spring 1944, the chances of recovery were minimal; the vast majority of goods seized earlier had been shipped east or were otherwise lost.\(^{52}\) Those returnees able to establish satisfactory documentation were granted an appointment to visit the display rooms. If the petitioner recognized an item, it was then compared with the previously established inventory; if it was deemed a match, the object was restored (initially as a loan) to its previous owner.\(^{53}\)

Petitioners included the rich and the poor, women and men, French and foreign, literate and not, from all neighborhoods of Paris and its suburbs, and they numbered in the thousands. From the fall of 1944 through the winter of 1945, essentially all of the requests for restitution were written by those directly concerned, or their relatives, and, as far as one can tell, without professional or institutional assistance. Some of the letters and their accompanying inventories were grandiloquent, typewritten in elegant French, on good paper (a rarity in wartime Paris), and included elaborated and beautifully descriptive lists of room after room of precious goods. Some of these, like that of the lawyer Nissim Samama, who had lived in the wealthy suburb of Neuilly, included photographs underscoring the extent of their loss. (See Figure 5.) Other inventories, like that shown in Figure 6, described one- or two-room dwellings that doubled as workshops and were written by those whose mastery of French was minimal, whose handwriting was poor, and who had no access to either ink or paper. These returnees compressed their losses into few words, inscribing them in pencil on crumpled, used paper.\(^{54}\) The differences in the material and linguistic quality of these documents, as well as of the homes they describe, combined with the equivalence of effort and desire expressed for the return of lost domestic possessions, highlight the shared sense of loss and impulse to re-create those lost homes through narration and depiction across the social spectrum.

The sheer detail of many of these inventories is breathtaking. In February 1944, for example, Bernard Abramovici-Doroy seems to have produced from his hospital bed in Lyon, where he was recovering from his experience as a prisoner of war for three years, a thirty-page handwritten inventory that lists where china, silver, and other things were purchased and in what model.\(^{55}\) In parallel, André Chemoul wrote, with the assistance of the concierge, an extraordinarily detailed account of his sister’s home. His sister, Edmond-Benjamin Azoulay, had been arrested and deported along with her husband and children on June 16, 1944. The inventory assembled by her brother included a sketch of some of the furniture and a note on the name of the shop in Algiers that had produced the dining room set.\(^ {56}\) It was not only those who had had many possessions who attempted to conjure them up through illustration; one petitioner had attempted to safeguard the only pieces of

\(^{52}\) As historians Annette Wieviorka and Floriane Azoulay have demonstrated, only about 20 percent of the contents of pillaged homes were ever recovered. Wieviorka and Azoulay, *Le Pillage des Appartements et son indemnisation* (Paris, 2000).

\(^{53}\) This is a simplified narrative. Petitioners often went back several times to the showrooms as new goods were displayed. Some attempted to alter their inventories after seeing something that they recognized and had forgotten to note (or that they wanted). The extensive paperwork generated by this process is now stored in the series AJ 38 in the Archives Nationales in Paris.

\(^{54}\) For an example of a sketch, see AN 38 AJ 5912, Berno, File no. 286.

\(^{55}\) AN 38 AJ 5909.

\(^{56}\) Ibid.
furniture he valued—a pair of sideboards—by entrusting them to a friend. When he returned to find them confiscated, his sole restitution claim was a carefully rendered drawing of his buffets. (See Figure 7.)

Recounting in infinite detail was one strategy of retrieving the memory of stolen things; another was to revisit, room by room, one’s home on paper. But even within this mode, there was much variation in the trajectories through the home produced by these narratives. Some authors clearly started at the front door and, either in fact or in their mind’s eye, retraced the path they most often took through the apartment or house, recounting all the objects they could remember as they took their real or imaginary walk through their now empty home. Some such accounts group like kinds of objects—all of the furniture, then all of the artwork, then all of the textiles, then all of the contents of the furniture—within each room. Others seem to literally go around a room, listing its contents from floor to ceiling. It is possible that such accounts tended to be produced by refugees whose homes were now standing literally empty and uninhabited and who could take the time to retrace and reimagine everyday trajectories. It is also possible that this was a strategy more often used by those who had lived for a long time in the same dwelling, and whose routines were well-established. In either case, it is a mnemonic strategy that emphasizes the physicality of the dwelling rather than the relationships within it. The dwelling itself determines the ordering of the narrative, and insofar as there is a human author, it seems to be as much the architect as it is the
A dispossessed inhabitant. But this kind of narrative, in its tracing of movement through the home, also evokes the repetition in which everyday life is in fact lived. In that evocation of a path trodden several times daily until abruptly it is no longer, one sees the capacity of such a path to be an in some sense all too human memory cue.

A different kind of trajectory, and in fact the more common one, was also organized by room, but seemingly in order of emotional or other priority rather than architectural logic. These narratives are markedly gendered in their ordering. Many of the married women start their accounts in the master bedroom, while many of the married men commence in the dining room. Mme Caracao’s inventory, in which she listed the general contents of the master bedroom, second bedroom, study, storage room, and then kitchen (in descending order) on the left-hand side of the paper, while providing more detailed comments about each on the right, provides an example of this mode of remembrance and exposition. (See Figure 8.)

Women’s greater focus on the bedroom may lie in part in the importance it traditionally played in French dowries. Brides would bring bedroom furniture, particularly the wardrobe, and linens into the household much more often than grooms, while the groom’s contribution was more likely to be furniture for the study or dining room. Furthermore, depending on the nature of the marriage contract, the goods the husband and wife each brought into the marriage often remained...
FIGURE 7: Drawing of two sideboards included in a restitution petition. AN 38 AJ 5912, Archives Nationales, Paris. Photograph by Leora Auslander.
Figure 8: Inventory included in a restitution petition. AN 38 AJ 5912, Archives Nationales, Paris. Photograph by Leora Auslander.
legally theirs. The emotional weight of bedrooms may have been increased by the fact that women often embroidered their own linens (stored in the wardrobe) as part of their trousseau, passing hours of their adolescence in that practice in bourgeois families even as late as the 1920s and 1930s. Bedrooms were still often the place both where women gave birth and where the dead were laid out. The fact that the few women listed as single on the inventories tended not to open their reconstruction of their home with the bedroom further underscores its importance as part of a familial, rather than individual, construction.

It is possible, however, that men’s listing of the dining room before the living room has less to do with their degree of affective connection to the room, and more to do with their sense of privacy. These were, after all, inventories written, at least in the most immediate sense, for the eyes of a state bureaucracy. Given different conventions for the public expression of affectively charged topics, men may have preferred to write, for this public audience, of the most public room in the house. I reached this interpretation after reading Claudine Vegh’s introduction to her interviews with adults who as children had lost one or both parents to deportation. She recounts that she was struck by the fact not only that essentially all of her interlocutors chose to conduct the interviews in their homes rather than in a neutral space or in Vegh’s apartment, but that they almost always chose to discuss these terribly difficult memories in their bedroom (and not the living or dining room). Almost all also chose to darken the room, only to complain that it was too bright. It would seem as if both men and women chose the space they found to be the most private, perhaps the most primordial, the most essential to the family, in which to go back to memories of lost parents. Whether the gendered difference in narration was a result of a differing affective charge or a difference in the perception of the appropriateness of public discussion of private matters, it does appear that women’s first identification with a space in their home was most often with the bedroom, and men’s most often with the dining room. In neither case does the kitchen, often imagined to be a central site of affect, loom large.

Whether in very large or very small, very rich or very poor dwellings, the kitchen was almost always one of the last rooms to be narrated. The kitchens in working-class households were minimal, often just a corner of a single-room dwelling. Cooking and heating were both accomplished on the same stove. When the kitchen was a separate area, it was a tiny space—a site of production, not sociability. In wealthier homes, kitchens were still occupied almost exclusively by domestic servants and were thus likewise minimal and cramped. One learns from these inventories that in Paris during this period, the significant space connected with food was not where meals were prepared, but where they were consumed.

Dining rooms, therefore, occupy a dominant space in these lists. Married men were most likely to start in the dining room (which also comes first in unmarried women’s accounts, but second in most married women’s). The dining room and dining room furniture were so important in both men’s and women’s accounts

57 Claudine Vegh, The ne lui ai pas dit au revoir (Paris, 1979), 34.
58 For a compelling analysis of gendered experiences of objects, see Beverly Gordon, “Intimacy and Objects: A Proxemic Analysis of Gender-Based Response to the Material World,” in Katherine Martinez and Kenneth L. Ames, eds., The Material Culture of Gender, the Gender of Material Culture (Winterthur, Del., 1997), 237, 252.
because that was the principal room for sociability both between the family and guests and within the family. In dwellings that were too small to have two public rooms, the salon was almost always the room to be omitted; single-room dwellings always included some dining furniture.

These “memory maps” were not mere mnemonic devices, however, and these inventories were not simply a response to the possibility of recovery of stolen goods. Such inventories, although generated as a response to a bureaucratic requirement, rarely, in fact, complied with it. The SRBS asked only for the most basic and factual of information—name, date of petition, date of confiscation if known, current address, address during the war, description of objects lost, and attestation of seizure. It was emphatic that goods taken before late spring of 1944 would not be recovered, and that there was no possibility at the time of reparations or granting of a substitute object. Petitioners refused to be limited by either the specific information requested or the warning. Many inventories are far too vague to be of any use in establishing an exact identification of a table, lamp, or sewing machine. Others are very detailed and precise, but not usefully so. It did not really help authorities to know that a bed or a set of china had been a wedding gift from one’s great-aunt forty years earlier; nor was it likely that the jam that had been carefully put up in the winter of 1942 was going to be found among the warehoused goods. And more than half the petitions were filed by those whose goods had been stolen well before the late spring of 1944, and whose chances of recovery were therefore nil. These deviations from the mandate suggest that the motivation in filing these claims was only tangentially the possibility of recovery of their lost goods.

These inventories were established for two other pressing reasons, both having to do with trying to heal psychic wounds—the first specific to the loss of personal goods in a democratic polity and consumer society, the second one more universal. The letters accompanying the inventories, as well as memoirs published in later years, make clear that even those who lost “only” their possessions (and not their lives) under the Vichy regime and Occupation felt betrayed by the French state and French society. By failing to protect the property of its inhabitants, the French state had failed to protect their dignity and humanity. The possession of property was central to both individuation and a public existence in three ways: one political, one social, and the last psychological. In the domain of politics, property had long been defined in the French political tradition as necessary for independent adult existence (one of the justifications for the exclusion of servants and, until later, women from the vote, for example, was that they were propertyless and therefore could not freely exercise their judgment). The social necessity of property was newer, a product of consumer society. The central definition of consumer society is one in which selves and groups are made as much through the goods a person owns as through the way he or she earns a living. Consumers choose the furnishings of everyday life—clothing, furniture, jewelry, cutlery, dishware—both to reflect back to themselves and to convey to others the person they think they are (or hope to be). Goods were not, then, merely the expression of a preexisting self, but one of

60 For an elaboration of this argument and relevant bibliography, see my Taste and Power (Berkeley, Calif., 1996), especially the introduction.
the means by which the self was constituted. In a consumer society, therefore, the loss of one’s possessions entails the partial loss of self. The recounting of every spoon, sock, doll, book, pot, earring, blanket, and chair in a home, the sketching of the sideboard, the recollection of the color of the curtains, the telling of the maker, the model, and the site of purchase of the wedding china—all was a way of trying to reclaim the materiality of life in the abstraction of prose. It was a work of mourning as much as a claim for restitution.

The letters accompanying these inventories support this reading. They, too, did not simply provide the information required by the state; rather, they were used at least to assert rights and often to rage, sometimes at length, against the state and society that had betrayed their authors. In other words, Parisian Jews used the forum inadvertently offered them by the provisional government to start to mourn the passing of lost lives and to imagine the future. They started the process of narrativizing loss. Some of them continued that process for years, in further restitution and then reparations claims, in memoirs, oral histories, research, and fiction.61

Any effort to understand the wartime and postwar experience of French (and European) Jews that does not take into account the processes by which they were dispossessed of their things and how they lived that dispossession during and after the war will be but a partial and impoverished history. Thus, the apparent incongruity of using this example in which objects exist only in their dematerialized, narrativized form in an essay attempting to persuade historians of the importance of studying objects is not so incongruous after all. That objects can speak so loudly even when they no longer exist is a clear indication of their importance in human lives and histories.

The two examples together demonstrate that historians can learn a great deal both from the objects with which people interact every day and from the insights that other disciplines bring to their study. A study of both the contemporary discourse on material culture and a variety of objects themselves in the period of the French Revolution reveals the complexity of the boundary between public and private and the politicization of both during the revolutionary decade. The evidence suggests that those advocating the transformation of the everyday were both more limited in their ambitions and more persuasive than has been thought. “Ordinary” producers and consumers took the mandate for a republican aesthetic seriously and sought not only to experience it in the street, at festivals, or in government buildings, but to live with it in the intimacy of their homes. It further suggests that assumptions concerning both the coercive politicization of everyday life “from above” and the ubiquity of that politicization are in need of additional research and reflection. The second example demonstrates the capacity of material culture both to provide new perspectives on classic questions and to open new domains to historical analysis. A reading, from the standpoint of material culture, of the texts

61 For a parallel account of the importance of narrating lost homes, see Bahloul, La maison de mémoire, particularly chap. 9.
that historical subjects produced about their things and their homes provides insight into the relationship between Jewish returnees and the French state and society and into the relationship between people and their homes as well as processes of mourning and healing.

Finally, these two examples also demonstrate that historians should not understand ourselves to be simply the consumers of other disciplines’ theories, analyses, knowledge base, and techniques. We also have, I would argue, a particular contribution to make to interdisciplinary reflection on material culture. That contribution lies in our discipline’s capacity to move among object, theory, and a wide variety of texts. While archaeologists often have objects but not texts, art historians representations but not objects, scholars of literature texts but no objects (and generally only texts of a limited kind), historians most often have access to both text and object as well as the craft skill to read wills, inventories, minutes of committee meetings, and tax returns with as much facility as novels or political treatises. Equally important is our discipline’s continued commitment, despite the theoretical and methodological challenges such an effort poses, to the goal of understanding, interpreting, and perhaps even explaining the world beyond the text or the object. A willingness to think abstractly about the universal and particular meanings of things, to think technically and precisely about material culture, and to continue to engage in the textual analysis and archival work that is our stock-in-trade will enable us to provide better answers to existing historical questions and to pose new ones, as well as to contribute to ongoing discussions of the material world.

A final step remains. There is, of course, a paradox embedded within this essay. I have argued that historians should include material culture within our range of canonical sources because people use things differently than words, and because such usages are not fully translatable into words. And yet, not only do words play a key role in both of my examples, but the essay is argued in prose and images (and not in objects). This is, in part, a product of the conventions of our profession and of current technical limits; scholarly journals are still produced on paper. Media with three-dimensional imaging are available, however, and may enter mainstream scholarly usage soon. The existence of these technologies will enable and oblige us to think more clearly about the nature of communication and expression, in both the past and the present, by both the subjects/objects of our analysis and ourselves.

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