
REVIEW ESSAYS

RETURN TO THE OBJECT IN ANTHROPOLOGICAL INQUIRY:

Examples from Latin America

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THE POTTERY OF ACATLAN: A CHANGING MEXICAN TRADITION. By Louana M. Lackey. (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1982. Pp. 164. \$35.00 cloth, \$18.95 paper.)

INDIAN CLOTHING BEFORE CORTES: MESOAMERICAN COSTUMES FROM THE CODICES. By Patricia Rieff Anawalt, foreword by H. B. Nicholson, charts by Jean Cuker Sells. (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1981. Pp. 232. \$60.00 cloth, \$37.95 paper.)

SPANISH THREAD ON INDIAN LOOMS: MEXICAN FOLK COSTUME / HILO ESPAÑOL, TELAR INDIGENA: EL TRAJE POPULAR MEXICANO. By Frances F. Berdan and Russell J. Barber, translated by Rafael E. Correa. Catalog for an exhibition at the University Art Gallery. (San Bernardino: California State University, 1988. Pp. 106. \$12.00 paper.)

MEXICAN CELEBRATIONS. By Eliot Porter and Ellen Auerbach, essays by Donna Pierce and Marsha C. Bol. (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1990. Pp. 115. \$40.00 cloth.)

DRAWING THE LINE: ART AND CULTURAL IDENTITY IN CONTEMPORARY LATIN AMERICA. By Oriana Baddeley and Valerie Fraser. (London: Verso, 1989. Pp. 164. \$49.50 cloth, \$17.95 paper.)

In the early decades of the twentieth century, professional anthropologists would have considered an ethnography incomplete without a

thorough description of what was then called "material culture." Certainly, objects produced by members of a culture are meaningful sources of data on technology, but they can also be used to gain insight into aesthetics, ideology, social organization, religious belief, and major social processes such as culture change and ethnic identity. Material culture became the subject of several early theoretical debates, including the fight between diffusionists and cultural evolutionists.¹ Diffusionists sought to explain cultural diversity by focusing on how customs and made objects spread from one group to another, while cultural evolutionists explained variation among cultures as the result of differential development along a line leading from primitive societies to civilization. Although early ethnographers may not always have made the most effective use in their cultural analyses of the objects they recorded, they filled many pages with photographs and drawings of the things made and used by various peoples. These early works now form a priceless record of cultural variability and the made objects that distinguished one group from another.

Sadly, as anthropologists became more sophisticated in analyzing sociocultural phenomena and were influenced by schools of thought like British social anthropology, many lost interest in material culture. The move away from material culture is partially responsible for marginalizing the museum in modern anthropology and alienating object-oriented subdisciplines such as archaeology and bioanthropology. As many cultural anthropologists have become enamored of symbolic, semiotic, phenomenological, and other mentalist approaches to culture, they have neglected other important roots of the discipline. Evidence now suggests, however, that the tide is turning and that material-culture studies may be making a comeback in anthropology and related fields.² The return to the object has even begun to produce its own wave of critics.³ It is this focus on material culture, both art and artifact, that links the five works under review here.

1. Harry R. Silver, "Ethnoart," *Annual Review of Anthropology* 8 (1979):267–307, see 269–72.

2. A number of scholars have noted this trend, including Brian Durrans, "Behind the Scenes: Museums and Selective Criticism," *Anthropology Today* 8 (1992):11–15, see 11; Stanley A. Freed, "Everyone Is Breathing on Our Vitrines: Problems and Prospects of Museum Anthropology," *Curator* 34, no. 1 (1991):58–79, see 74–75; Remo Guidieri and Francesco Pellizzi, "Editorial," *Res*, no. 1 (1981):3–6 (published in Cambridge, Mass.); Francesco Pellizzi, "Editorial," *Res*, nos. 19–20 (1990–91):5–7; *Material Anthropology: Contemporary Approaches to Material Culture*, edited by Barrie Reynolds and Margaret A. Stott (Lanham, Md.: University Press of America, 1987), 2; and Nancy McDowell, "Special Meeting in a Special Place: Arts and Goods in Santa Fe!" *Anthropology Newsletter* 33, no. 6, (1992):6. See also *Objects and Others: Essays on Museums and Material Culture*, edited by George W. Stocking, Jr., (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985).

3. Recent criticisms of the display of material culture in museums include James Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1988), especially chaps. 9–10; and *Exhibiting Cultures: The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display*, edited by Ivan Karp and Steven D. Lavine (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991).

Two of the books were not written by anthropologists, but all the authors examine objects for what they can reveal about their makers and users. These works represent valuable approaches to analyzing cultural processes and in this sense connect with the primary concerns of anthropology and all other disciplines that seek to increase our understanding of the human condition. The objects studied range from pottery to textiles, photographs to paintings, and from tourist art to fine art. By defining the objects discussed as examples of material culture, the authors help to break down artificial barriers between disciplines and open up possibilities for a more unified approach to the study of culture.

The Pottery of Acatlán: A Changing Mexican Tradition, by archaeologist and potter Louana Lackey, has recently been issued in paperback. Although not without limitations, this book exemplifies much that is positive about research on material culture. Lackey notes that despite pottery's importance and the critical role of ethnographic analogy in archaeological research, few studies have systematically examined the behavior of contemporary traditional potters. Most archaeologists are not themselves potters and are forced to make guesses about such features of prehistoric pottery specimens as manufacturing techniques, composition of the material used, firing temperatures, and so on. Lackey reports that researchers are resorting increasingly to "imitative experiment," that is, attempts to reproduce archaeological evidence by trial and error (p. 5). For example, archaeologists may gather materials available to prehistoric potters and try different techniques to duplicate methods of vessel construction.

Lackey, however, offers a more direct method for increasing our understanding of prehistoric pottery. Why not search out contemporary potters who are the heirs to the methods and techniques used by their ancient forebears and observe what they do? For her own ethnoarchaeological experiment, she chose the Mexican town of Acatlán in southern Puebla. Acatlán is renowned as a center for producing the tourist pottery sold in markets throughout Mexico, and according to Lackey, "it appeared that all the New World pre-Columbian pottery-making techniques could be observed there still in use" (p. ix). Rather than maintain her role as anthropologist, she apprenticed herself to master potter Mario Martínez Espinosa: "I feel that assuming the role of journeyman potter (rather than anthropologist) enabled me to obtain information that I could have obtained no other way" (p. 9).

Lackey makes a series of observations about pottery making in Acatlán that provide insights into the social organization of the craft. Potters in Acatlán are ranked according to artistic merit, and high-status potters may be emulated by others. They learn their craft from family members or sometimes by apprenticing themselves to a master. Established potters may also develop a following of poorer neighbors who

purchase raw materials from them in order to produce wares to sell in the local market. The potter takes on these people almost as charity cases and may even fire their pieces along with his own in the family kiln. Lackey found that the overall status of potters is rather low in the social hierarchy of Acatlán, however, and that generally they are barely able to make ends meet (pp. 36–39, 42). In Acatlán the nuclear family constitutes the pottery-making work group. Lackey describes the layout of Martínez Espinosa's house including work areas, the location of the kiln, and what family members do with broken or cracked pieces. These and other observations provide archaeologists with numerous "middle-range theories" for interpreting their findings on prehistoric populations.

The ethnoarchaeology of pottery making has already yielded direct benefits to archaeologists in their efforts to comprehend cultures. Lackey points out the work of George Foster in identifying the *parador*, a key tool used by Acatlán potters. These flat-bottomed pottery saucers or plates, often with abraded bottoms, have been found in archaeological sites dating from the Pre-Classic. Potters in Acatlán use an almost identical item as a turntable for making and decorating individual pieces. The circular abrasions on the bottoms of both contemporary and ancient *paradores* link these objects, thereby enhancing researchers' ability to interpret the archaeological record.

Lackey describes in detail the various techniques used by Martínez Espinosa and his family to construct their pieces. She also explains how this knowledge is passed from one generation of potters to the next. In the final chapter, Lackey presents evidence that Acatlán was probably an important center for pre-Hispanic pottery making. She suggests that the mysterious origin of the famous pre-Hispanic Mesoamerican thin orange-ware may have been Acatlán, thus underscoring the significance of her ethnoarchaeological study for solving specific problems in archaeology. Although the entire Mexican pottery industry is currently suffering from market fluctuations and the introduction of new techniques, Lackey views this situation as an opportunity for creativity on the part of potters and distributors of their work.

Lackey's well-illustrated *Pottery of Acatlán* points the way toward a new appreciation of the object in studying cultural process. Detractors may bemoan the preoccupation with material objects, but I found that the book communicated the cultural ambiance in Acatlán very well. Pottery is the focus of life for certain families in the town, and as such it is an appropriate subject for a book about them. Pottery is what people in Acatlán think about and care about, and Lackey has succeeded in capturing this key feature of their lives. My main criticism is that she did not give readers enough information. One is not sure how generalizable her findings among the Martínez Espinosa family are to other families of potters. While she correctly assesses the importance of economic factors

in pottery manufacture, she does not provide much information on pricing, profit margins, who controls the market, who purchases the pieces, or other factors that would clarify the situation. Finally, more observations from Martínez Espinosa and his family would have been welcome. I suspect that Martínez Espinosa's wife, who Lackey credits as largely responsible for the successful marketing of the family output, could have contributed interesting ideas about producing and marketing pottery.

Patricia Anawalt's *magnum opus* on pre-Hispanic Mesoamerican clothing, *Indian Clothing before Cortés: Mesoamerican Costumes from the Codices*, demonstrates even more clearly how objects may be used to analyze culture. In addition, her study illustrates that scholars are not required to have direct access to the objects themselves to make use of them. Because no examples of pre-Hispanic clothing survive today, Anawalt had to rely primarily on depictions of clothing in the codices as her data source. She uses twenty-eight of these surviving pictorial manuscripts to compare and contrast the clothing traditions of six groups: the Aztecs, Tlaxcalans, Tarascans, Mixtecs, Lowland Mayas, and the Borgia Group (of unknown origin). Clothing is not a trivial topic for understanding the nature of Mesoamerican civilization. Anawalt convinces the reader that weaving and the resulting fabrics and clothing were an "indispensable part of the social framework" (p. 11). She notes that for the Indians, "the wearing of apparel was strictly controlled by both custom and law" and that "since each Indian group dressed in a distinctive and characteristic manner, a great deal of ethnographic and historical information is contained in depictions of their clothing" (p. 3). Clothing also provides an ideal index of complex processes of acculturation that followed from the cataclysm of the conquest.

Anawalt relies on anthropologist H. G. Barnett's system of analyzing material culture, which is based on three fundamental properties of all made objects: principle, form, and function. The principle is defined as the main characteristic or theme of the object (for example, the draping of a garment), the form is its appearance, and the function is the contribution the object makes to the social group. Anawalt further categorizes clothing items by modifying a scheme developed by costume historian François Boucher. He reduced all varieties of clothing to five "archetypes" based on how the garment is worn or constructed: draped, slip-on, open-sewn, closed-sewn, and limb-encasing. By organizing her data according to this classification scheme, Anawalt was able to compare the six groups in a systematic way.

Cloth was a key item of tribute demanded of conquered regions, and yet weaving remained a home industry. Cloth in all six cultures was produced by women and girls on the backstrap loom, an item still used widely. The size of the woven cloth could not exceed the capacity of the backstrap loom, which is limited by the weaver's reach. Seamstresses

rarely resorted to cutting and sewing as a means of varying cloth size, probably because these practices result in substantial waste. In general, Mesoamerican costumes were constructed simply, although they were often highly decorated. The typical practice was to drape pieces of cloth on the body “just as they came from the loom” (p. 14).

Anawalt devotes a separate chapter in *Indian Clothing before Cortés* to the clothing practices of each of the six groups. She starts with the Aztecs, the group with the most detailed information available. The Aztecs (or more properly, the Mexica) lived in a hierarchically ranked society ranging from aristocratic rulers to serfs and slaves. Social advancement was achieved primarily through success on the battlefield as the Aztec state expanded to incorporate new territories into its tribute empire. The various social ranks and accompanying privileges were regulated by sumptuary laws (which governed personal habits and expenditures on luxury goods), and a key emblem of status was clothing. Certain garments were worn by all social ranks. The breechclout and the hipcloth (a triangular piece of cloth worn around the waist and tied on the right side) are two examples of garments worn by Aztec males regardless of rank. Women of all levels of status wore skirts composed of a length of fabric wrapped around the lower body and secured at the waist. These basic items varied, however, in appearance and material, with fabrics for commoners usually woven from coarse maguey, palm, or yucca fiber. Only persons of high rank could wear fabric made from cotton. In addition, use of colors and decorations was carefully controlled according to one's place in the status hierarchy.

The *tilmatli*, a cloak worn by Aztec males, exemplifies how clothing reflected rank. Spanish chroniclers wrote that commoners wore cloaks of crude fiber while aristocrats were permitted cloaks of fine cotton. Aztec laws allowed all men to decorate their cloaks, but certain designs (such as the whirlpool, small face, twisted weave, and jaguar motifs) were reserved for commoners. The commoners themselves were internally ranked, and these design motifs may have reflected sublevels of status. In contrast, a warrior who had captured his first prisoner received an orange cloak with a striped border and a scorpion design along with a “carmine-colored breechclout of many colors” (p. 28). Capture of a second prisoner earned the warrior an orange-bordered cloak, and a third prisoner gained him a cloak designed with the “jewel of the *ehecatli*” (wind). Even the manner of wearing this garment was prescribed. Most men tied the cloak over the right shoulder, but certain nobles and priests were allowed to tie it in front. Anawalt explains, “The *tilmatli* was the principal visual status marker in Aztec society, and its material, decoration, length, and manner of wearing instantly revealed the class and rank of the wearer” (p. 30). Clothing may also have motivated individuals to achieve higher status.

Anawalt provides detailed descriptions of the various categories of

clothing and illustrates them with black and white photographs and color plates taken from the codices. She also discusses the tailored “suits” worn by certain elite warriors and the famous Aztec cotton armor that proved so impenetrable to Spanish swords. All five of Boucher’s clothing archetypes are represented among the Aztecs, and Anawalt concludes that Aztec costume reflected the aggressive, militant, and hierarchical nature of their society. In reconstructing clothing practices, Anawalt found that “the more complex the context, the more elaborate and specialized the costume” (p. 60).

The chapters in *Indian Clothing before Cortés* on the five remaining groups are similar in structure and content but provide somewhat less detail, reflecting the fewer historical sources available. Tlaxcalan costume is virtually identical to the Aztec, which is not surprising considering how closely related these two groups were culturally and linguistically. Although Tarascans possessed garments in four of the five clothing archetypes, they diverged most from the general Mesoamerican pattern evidenced in the other cases. Several garments were unique to the Tarascans, and they did not wear the breechclout. This finding leads Anawalt to revive speculation that the Tarascans were an intrusive group that may have originated in South America. The Mixtecs, by contrast, owned garments in all five clothing archetypes and appear to have worn a wider range of clothing than even the Aztecs. Based on depictions in the codices, their clothing seems to confirm their reputation for excellent workmanship and a concern for refinement and artistic achievement. Anawalt attributes this difference partly to the nonhierarchical character of Mixtec society, which resulted in less control over design distribution. The mysterious Borgia Group, according to the styles of clothing depicted, appears to Anawalt to have derived from the Puebla-Mixteca area, although two of the codices originated in the Gulf Coast. Last of all, the Lowland-Maya costume repertory overlapped with highland costumes in four of the five archetypes, the most striking difference being the absence of elaborate ritual garments and the apparent lack of attributable influence from the highland cultures.

Anawalt concludes *Indian Clothing before Cortés* with two brief chapters, “The Clothing as a Reflection of Culture” and “What the Garments Tell Us.” She demonstrates that clothing provides a crucial body of evidence for scholars interested in Mesoamerican civilizations. Her work is indeed a rich source of information that can be mined by scholars for years to come. The study would have a greater impact, however, if Anawalt had related her conclusions more definitively to current debates about the nature of pre-Hispanic society. Nevertheless, she has accumulated the type and quality of data that will prove invaluable as these debates continue. One obvious extension of Anawalt’s work would be to trace the changes that have occurred in the region in the five centuries

since the conquest, thus linking her findings to processes of acculturation that define the Mesoamerican culture area even today.

Frances Berdan's and Russell Barber's *Spanish Thread on Indian Looms: Mexican Folk Costume* is the exhibition catalog of a display of contemporary Mesoamerican costume shown in 1988 at California State University in San Bernardino. The volume is written in parallel Spanish and English text and contains many black and white images and color plates of clothing types. Berdan and Barber use Anawalt's pioneering book as a baseline and tie her work into analysis of the contemporary garments they discuss. They chose to focus on garments as made objects that reflect cultural processes: "clothing is one of the many delicate barometers of culture change, recording both minor oscillations and major trends" (p. 7). Berdan and Barber concur with Anawalt that clothing types are shared throughout Mesoamerica, and thus they lend empirical support to the conclusions of Eva Hunt and others who, in studying symbol systems and other realms of culture, perceive a fundamental similarity among Mesoamerican civilizations at a deep level.⁴

Berdan and Barber make a strong case in *Spanish Thread on Indian Looms* for the argument that clothing is anything but a superficial reflection of culture, pretty to look at but undeserving of serious analysis. In their view, the manufacture and decoration of fabrics and their transformation into garments are the primary means by which women and girls showcase their skills and create the basis for their gender identity. Moreover, clothing is crucial to the way that various ethnic groups in Mesoamerica demonstrate identity, as Indians in opposition to mestizos and also as one Indian group differentiating itself from another. Finally, clothing is implicated in the complex means by which various individuals express their identity as members of social classes.

The first step in any analysis is to gather and systematize data, the primary contribution of both Anawalt's and Berdan and Barber's studies. Another example of the sophisticated type of analysis possible with costume can be found in a recent work by Sheldon Annis entitled *God and Production in a Guatemalan Town*.⁵ He examines Guatemalan weaving in the context of the rise of Protestantism among the contemporary Maya. Annis found that women's weavings are like maps that can be read, and

4. See Eva Hunt, *The Transformation of the Hummingbird: Cultural Roots of a Zinacantan Mythical Poem* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1976); and Alfredo López Austin, *The Human Body and Ideology: Concepts of the Ancient Nahuas*, translated by Thelma Ortiz de Montellano and Bernard Ortiz de Montellano (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1988), 22.

5. Sheldon Annis, *God and Production in a Guatemalan Town* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1987). See also Martin Prechtel and Robert S. Carlsen, "Weaving and Cosmos amongst the Tzutujil Maya of Guatemala," *Res* no. 15 (1988):122–32. In this article, Prechtel and Carlsen show how weaving and the headcloth are symbolically linked to birth and world renewal among the modern Maya.

he once attempted to write a “grammar” of the various designs he collected. According to Annis, a particular weaving worn as a blouse “says” much about its wearer, announcing, for example, “Here I am, María, a somewhat free-thinking yet still traditional (probably Catholic) young Indian woman from the Sinay household in the *aldea* of Santiago Zamora, of the *municipio* of San Antonio Aguas Calientes, central Cakchiquel region, western Guatemala” (p. 119). Annis goes on to demonstrate how the textiles themselves represent wealth for Catholics but have become a means to greater wealth for Protestant converts (p. 133). He thus shows how scholars can illuminate some of the most important and yet inaccessible aspects of culture by analyzing made objects.

The focus on material culture inevitably leads to discussing definitions of art and the aesthetic. Harry Silver has proposed the term *ethnoart* to convey “the idea of a uniquely anthropological view of art concentrating not only upon objects, but also upon the sociocultural processes molding their production, use, meaning, and appreciation.”⁶ Eliot Porter’s and Ellen Auerbach’s *Mexican Celebrations* contains ninety striking large-format color photos organized around the theme of the religious fiesta in Mexico. On the one hand, the photos are works of fine art produced by Porter, a renowned photo-documentarian, in collaboration with Auerbach. On the other, the photos are priceless documents containing historical and ethnographic information that can provide a basis for cultural analysis.⁷ The images were made in the mid-1950s and are therefore some of the earliest color photos of these celebrations. Photographs are themselves objects that reveal something of the sociocultural context of the photographer, but they have also been used for decades by ethnographers wishing to record objects and behavior in the field. In this sense, photographs perhaps expand Silver’s concept of ethnoart in providing a bridge between the fine arts and the social sciences.

Mexican Celebrations contains photos of church altars and statues, Mexicans attending services and selling souvenirs, church interiors, close-ups of colorful items for sale, festival decorations, costumed performers and dancers, and scenes from Indian church celebrations. No artificial lighting was used, giving the photos a dense, somber quality that captures the feel of a church interior. The two brief essays, however, are not adequate to the task of placing the photos in their proper cultural and historical context. Although the essayists attempt to provide some general background, their documentation clearly falls in the fine-arts camp that expects the photos to stand on their own as works of art. The essayists thus miss the opportunity to contribute to ethnographic understanding of

6. Silver, “Ethnoart,” 269.

7. See Edward Ranney, “Recent Latin American Photography Books,” *LARR* 26, no. 3 (1991):235–46.

Catholicism in Mexico as reflected in the objects and events recorded in the volume. Worse still, *Mexican Celebrations* misses even the chance to help Anglo-Americans and Northern Europeans in comprehending Mexican religious art. Those statues and paintings depicting bloody and mortified flesh often offend Anglo tastes, and this volume would have been an ideal place to explain some of the aesthetic and cultural principles underlying these portrayals.

The final work under review here, *Drawing the Line: Art and Cultural Identity in Contemporary Latin America*, takes readers directly into the world of fine art, where analysts tend to elevate the object to a place above and beyond pedestrian sociocultural reality. But not so in this excellent study of Latin American painting by art historians Oriana Baddeley and Valerie Fraser. They fight a two-front war on behalf of Latin American fine art. On one front, they note that works produced by Latin American artists have often been dismissed or ignored by observers along the Euro-American art axis, in which art production outside this closed group "is by definition peripheral" (p. 90). Baddeley and Fraser link this invisibility to the Third World status of many countries in Latin America and also to the ongoing effects of colonialism. On the second front, they present a case arguing that in order to understand made objects (including works of fine art), analysts must know about the cultural and historical context in which the objects were produced. Here we come full circle back to the realization that we need the contexts provided by historical background and contemporary culture to understand objects as well as objects to understand history and culture.

Study of Latin American painting reveals some noteworthy contrasts with the Euro-American traditions from which it originally sprang. Latin American artists never developed a tradition of landscape painting, and they have been little influenced by impressionism. As Baddeley and Fraser explain, "the *l'art pour l'art* ethos of the Impressionists and subsequent European movements is inappropriate, often unimaginable within the Latin American context" (p. 9). In Europe, landscape painting became a medium for exploring visual effects of light, shading, and color as ends in themselves, whereas in Latin America, "any consideration of the land is charged above all with questions of occupation, ownership and use, of appropriation, expropriation, exploitation, and control" (p. 10). Hence the painter's work in Latin America cannot be understood as simply an aesthetic and intellectual exercise. Painting is above all political; it is also a means for establishing an original and authentic identity for all Latin Americans.⁸ The latter point explains why it is surrealism, the European movement based on the search for meaning and identity following World War I, that has had the greatest impact on Latin American painters.

8. Karp and Lavine, *Exhibiting Cultures*, 4.

Baddeley and Fraser are well aware that Latin America is also one of the most active producers of popular arts in the world. They stress that popular art is not static and quaint (as implied in English by the phrase "folk art") but is linked to the indigenous and peasant peoples of Latin America and also to social and religious movements.⁹ This significance has not escaped Latin American painters, who return to popular arts frequently in search of identity and authenticity. As Baddeley and Fraser point out, acknowledging the popular allows painters to pay homage to their cultural history, avoid elitism, and capture the freshness and exuberance of folk traditions outside of the "bourgeois network of galleries" (p. 119). This flow from popular art to fine art is a hallmark of aesthetic traditions in Latin America. Overall, Baddeley and Fraser have produced in *Drawing the Line* a book on painting in the fine-art tradition that will interest historians, social scientists, and anyone else wanting to study the sociocultural reality of Latin America. Baddeley and Fraser have thus contributed to breaking down the barriers that isolate the fine arts from other scholarly endeavors while maintaining their focus on the object.

Together, these five works typify the many appealing and high-quality publications being produced on made objects from Latin America. In selecting this focus, the authors follow the lead of their Latin American colleagues, who have never lost interest in material culture. But like most works of this nature, these five books fail to transcend provincial concerns with a specific object type in order to contribute to developing a theory of objects as a whole. The authors render a valuable service in assembling and cataloging artifacts, and many make tentative but convincing statements about the role that a given set of objects plays in a culture. On the whole, however, the authors of these works seem timid about pushing their analyses beyond the known limits. It seems to me that until we take this leap, we will never get beyond the cataloging stage.

A first step is to recognize that made objects cannot be separated from the technological, aesthetic, and cultural factors that define their creation and existence. One possible approach outlined by Bryan Pfaffenberger and coming out of the new field of science and technology studies is the concept of "sociotechnical systems."¹⁰ According to this perspective, objects come to be made and used in response to a complex interaction of factors. Made objects including tools and items of technology do not develop outside a specific cultural context and, contrary to the common view, cannot be perceived as developing in a unilinear progression. For example, Pfaffenberger, citing George Basalla, notes that the wheel

9. See similar treatments appearing in *Ethnic and Tourist Arts: Cultural Expressions from the Fourth World*, edited by Nelson H. H. Graburn (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1976).

10. Bryan Pfaffenberger, "Social Anthropology of Technology," *Annual Review of Anthropology* 21 (1992):491–516.

was once invented in Mesoamerica but was never adopted for transportation. The wheel was also developed in the Near East, initially for ceremonial use but was later taken over by the military. As the wheel spread to other regions, it was eventually used to create cargo vehicles, but the invention in the Near East itself was given up in favor of the camel.¹¹ Thus one finds little evidence of any logical progression of technological development. Along this line, Lackey points out that the craftsmen of Acatlán have not adopted the potter's wheel because it would not function as well as the pre-Hispanic mold in turning out identical products. Thus the potter's wheel is absent in Acatlán not because the artisans are incapable of appreciating its use but because it does not fit into the context of the industry there. Hence one might say that the mother of invention is not so much necessity—or felt need—as the complex interplay of technology in the context of a specific sociocultural system. As Basalla has pointed out, in many instances it is invention that gives birth to necessity.¹²

Style is a complex topic that has been the subject of much discussion, particularly among archaeologists.¹³ Style is usually defined as aesthetic variations that exist apart from the strictly functional aspects of an object. In explaining sociotechnical systems theory, however, Pfaffenberger asserts that style may be the primary *raison d'être* of an object and that style cannot be assumed to be of secondary importance in every cultural context: "In short, the distinction between 'function' and 'style' is a product of the decontextualization and dehistoricization of artifacts."¹⁴ Thus differences in costume style among the pre-Hispanic peoples of Mexico and between the styles of Latin American and European painters may be essential vehicles for identity and therefore a primary reason why these artifacts were created in the first place and why they look the way they do.

Sociotechnical systems theory also invalidates the commonsense distinction between cultural practices that work (those that are scientific or technical) and those that do not work (the ones deemed magical). When employing this new perspective, both categories of practice are necessary if scholars are to understand techniques and objects of material culture. Ritual objects and practices, like those photographed by Porter and Auerbach, play a crucial role in the sociotechnical system of Mexico in that they are essential to creating community and ethnic identity, recruiting and coordinating labor, providing political leadership, and so on.

11. George Basalla, *The Evolution of Technology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 7–11; see also Colin Renfrew, "Varna and the Emergence of Wealth in Prehistoric Europe," in *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*, edited by Arjun Appadurai, 141–68 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986).

12. Basalla, *The Evolution of Technology*, 7.

13. For a recent review of the topic, see Michelle Hegmon, "Archaeological Research on Style," *Annual Review of Anthropology* 21 (1992):517–36.

14. Pfaffenberger, "Social Anthropology of Technology," 504.

In this way, it can be perceived that technical practices of planting a cornfield are no more real or essential to the operation of this particular socio-technical system than are the rituals and sacred objects that complete the system and create the cultural context that makes a given technology viable. Sociotechnical systems theory may turn out to be the revolution that is needed to sustain a revived interest in contemporary material culture. It will be short-lived, however, if it is employed as yet another device to avoid scientific explanations of human behavior and culture change.

If this radical contextualization of material culture proves too extreme for some analysts, a number of less-encompassing approaches have the potential for expanding our knowledge of the objects that humans make and use. These approaches are being explored by a number of scholars in reference to Latin America and other world areas.¹⁵ While all the works reviewed here stand on their own, when taken together they signal a turn toward material culture by scholars from a number of disciplines.¹⁶ Books like these that focus on artisans and artists and the objects they create ensure that Latin America will play a critical role in this global trend.

15. For example, see Appadurai, *The Social Life of Things*; Catharine Good Eshelman, *Haciendo la lucha: arte y comercio nahuas de Guerrero* (Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1988); Nancy D. Munn, *Walbiri Iconography: Graphic Representation and Cultural Symbolism in a Central Australian Society* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1973); Alan R. Sandstrom and Pamela Effrein Sandstrom, *Traditional Papermaking and Paper Cult Figures of Mexico* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1986); Margot Blum Schevill, *Costume as Communication* (Bristol, R.I.: Haffenreffer Museum of Anthropology, Brown University, 1986); *Textile Traditions of Mesoamerica and the Andes: An Anthology*, edited by Margot Blum Schevill, Janet Catherine Berlo, and Edward B. Dwyer (New York: Garland, 1991); and Jane Schneider, "The Anthropology of Cloth," *Annual Review of Anthropology* 16 (1987):409–48.

16. One example of this renewed interest is the decision of the American Ethnological Society to designate material culture as the theme for its 1993 annual meeting, "Arts and Goods: Possession, Commoditization, Representation."