

Objects From Abroad in 18th-20th Centuries (New York, 25 Apr 13)

CNRS NYU Center for International Research in the Humanities and Social Sciences,
Transitions UMI 3199, 4 Washington Square North, New York, New York, 10003, Apr
25, 2013

Deadline: Dec 31, 2012

Noémie Etienne

Objects From Abroad. The Life of Exotic Goods in France and the United States
(18th-20th Centuries)

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The development of material studies and consumption studies, of anthropology of the material world and the material culture of art history shows growing interest for the material dimension of pictures and goods. This perspective calls attention to the physical and social life of things. In this sense, our conference looks to analyse the production of goods and their transformation, in connection with their various uses and contexts. A historiography focusing on the construction of international spaces and exchanges through the movements of things, goods, merchandises and artworks is currently on its way.

This conference would like to concentrate on the goods imported in France and the United States between the 18th and the 20th century, and their existence within their new environment: business or tourist trips, where the exotic objects were collected and gathered in private spaces; scientific expeditions, where “anthropological” artefacts were collected for Western museums. What kind of things and goods were brought back to New York City, Paris, and the other American and French cities – and through cities of many countries – between the 18th and the 20th century? How were they exhibited, put on display, but also converted and updated? We wish to interrogate the life and “career” of goods, their collection and their circulation, as well as the way in which goods acted upon reception societies. What was the impact of these objects on ways to consume, to live, to dress, to create? What about the processes of translation and interpretation that accompanies such uses and appropriation?

Exchanges between Europe and United States were heavy and significant but they are seldom analysed. Therefore they need to be carefully examined. At the same time, paying attention to

these goods is also a way to repopulate these worlds with different actors. Collectors, but also ethnographers, dealers, painters, soldiers: they were all inventing, marketing and consuming these singular things. From this angle, these goods become boundary objects that mobilized and gathered different communities – scientific, commercial, artistic, etc. Around the actors lie various spaces: we would like to observe the large scale movements but also micro-movements and circulations, and also how these goods were set up and displayed in museums as well as in houses. In this sense, this conference tries to link social practices and representations, visual and material cultures, private and public spaces.

Four directions, all connected, could be explored during this conference:

1. Uses and re-uses

Processes of decontextualisation and recontextualisation (collection, re-use, reparation) will focus our attention. How are the objects sold, exposed, reterritorialized? When bought, how are they used? And, when necessary, how are they repaired or redesigned? Rebuilt and recomposed? Through a series of case studies, it may be useful to follow certain objects from the merchant's shop to the individual interiors, or from the private space to the museum, looking carefully at the hands and gestures that welcome and transform the goods.

2. Witnesses and souvenirs

Some objects, such as travel souvenirs, have a special memorial function. What kind of memory do they keep? What are they witnessing? How do they tell us an emotion, a narrative, a story or a part of history? This reflection can also be extended to the issue of fake and authenticity, or of hyper-reality, by studying life-casts, prints, or, in some cases, photography.

3. Actors and markets

Objects are taken as part of a chain involving various actors and consumers that need to be identified. Who are the people involved in these exchanges and what are their roles in the invention of these objects? In their updating and marketing? What are the specific issues, circuits and contours of these markets? How do the different actors and consumers use these objects to develop various identities?

4. Fictions and identities

The fourth axis will focus on fiction, disguise, game, and more generally on fictional use. Joanna Sofaer has already shown how the use and representation of some exotic accessories build identities. How do dresses, dishes or accessories related to tobacco, for instance, work on the identity of their owner? How are these objects mobilized and used in the artworld, in private or public spaces, theater plays or paintings?

Call for Paper

Submission Deadline: December 31, 2012

Date: April 25, 2013

Place : CNRS NYU Center for International Research in the Humanities and Social Sciences, Transitions UMI 3199

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Paper abstracts (maximum 300 words) and a short bio (maximum 100 words) should be submitted to Noemie Etienne (noemie.etienne@unige.ch) and Manuel Charpy (manuel.charpy@wanadoo.fr) by December 31, 2012.

Reference:

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