Reflections on Visual and Material Culture: An Example from Southwest Chicago

J. Ulbricht

The University of Texas at Austin

Although several art educators have called our attention to the importance of studying visual culture, others have widened the discussion to include material culture and its effects on our lives. Because of growing concern for the value of exploring the personal and social functions of visual and material culture, the purpose of this article is to reflect on the impact of the objects that I encountered personally during my formative years. My stories told here will exemplify topics and methods that teachers and students can use to learn about the significance of their visual and material cultures.

Recently, many art educators have commented upon the impact of visual culture and its potential for art education (Duncum, 1996, 2002a, 2002b; Freedman, 2003; Tavin, 2002). Visual culture is, in part, a term that describes the imagery found in places such as magazines, newspapers, television, shopping malls, amusement parks, and the Internet. Concern for visual culture is expanding because of the proliferation of electronic media and the growing amount of visual information that it brings to the public. Due to its enticing format and social content, it is increasingly fundamental to the cultural transformation of social interaction, political discourse, and cultural identity (Freedman, 2003).

With the expansion of visual culture and its impact on cultural transformation, art educators (Barrett, 2003; Duncum, 2002b; Freedman, 2003; Stokrocki, 2003; Tavin, 2006) have urged that we teach about it in art education. To help students understand the implications of visual culture, Barrett (2003) encourages teachers and students to analyze it for its literal and implied messages. Tavin (2006) and Duncum (1996) propose that we confront its messages, meanings, and those who provided them for us, while Stokrocki (2003) sees visual culture as something that we should explore with students in communities. With these methods, teachers can inform student choices about the forces that feed and have fed their perceptions.

Although discussion of visual culture has increased in recent years, Bolin and Blandy (2003) have directed our attention to the broader concept of material culture, which they define as a term that encompasses all human-made and modified forms, objects, and expressions manifested in the past and our contemporary world. For Bolin and Blandy, visual culture is an aspect of material culture. They assert that material culture is a more appropriate focus for art education because it encompasses a broader range of endeavors that often have multi-sensory aspects such as smell, taste, and touch.
as sound, smell, video, kinesthetic experience, performance, and storytelling. They state that if teachers limited themselves to the visual culture concept they would eliminate from discussion many important cultural and personal artifacts and newer forms of art. According to Blandy and Bolin, citizens interact with a variety of human-made forms and these interactions help them become the people that they are.

When we look at a broad range of cultural forms to learn about histories and civilizations, we find that they are spatially and temporally located, and that many contextual variables contribute to their meanings. Furthermore, we learn that people do not all regard material culture in the same way. To explore these concepts further, this article examines how we learn about the value of material culture and how we use it to create meaning in our lives.

Those of us who hold ourselves up as commentators on material culture must recognize that we are not commenting from some idealized vacuum. Artifacts of our day were instrumental in our development, and we must examine our own formation both to determine our prejudices and biases on the one hand, and to seek to share the process of nonclassroom-driven insights we may have had with our students. To consider the impact of material culture on my personal development, I began listing and reflecting on my significant encounters with objects during the 1940s and 1950s when I lived on the southwest side of Chicago. During this time, Chicago was a model for America, and one that can give us a good picture of the effect of material culture on today’s youth. Chicago was a racially diverse city with rapidly changing demographics and extreme dislocations of economics. It was a city where citizens from many ethnic and cultural backgrounds had dreams about a new way of life in the United States after World War II.

Although I did not grow up in the electronic age, I experienced visual culture in advertising, shopping malls, and amusement parks. However, what I remember most from my formative years were a variety of objects including books, toys, magazines, photographs, and art that Bolin and Blandy (2003) would call material culture. To learn more about the potential impact these objects had on me, and the values that I ascribed to them, I will present and analyze my encounters through autobiographical stories. Although teachers often encourage reflective thinking, such a process will be personally enriching and it will suggest ways that educators can engage students in material culture study.

**Toward An Autobiographical Research Method**

Autobiography, autoethnography, personal narrative, and arts-based research are current trends in research methodology that call for the need to examine self in relation to the social context. Through constructing
and interrogating our personal histories, we can distance ourselves and bring into greater awareness the values that inform our life choices. Today, researchers are studying lives in context more frequently (Cole & Knowles, 2001). No matter how objective researchers try to be, they are recognizing that their lives are about lived interactions, participatory experiences, and embodied knowledge (Nash, 2004). For me, this approach crosses a major line, since teachers taught me that I was a privileged observer, not the observed. This new outlook can democratize education as it helps us see the derivation and individuality of our perspectives and those of others.

Nash (2004) advocates that investigators write scholarly personal narratives (SPN). He defines SPNs as self-interrogating interviews that investigators can use to make narrative sense of their learning experiences. Such personal reflection is part of the process that researchers such as Ruth Behar (1993, 1995, 1996) use to write vulnerable anthropology and self-reflexive, shadow biographies. Others (Atkinson, 2001; Ellis & Bochner, 2000) reflect on the past to write scholarly memoirs, poetic transcriptions, and autobiographical ethnography.

We can think of personal scholarly narratives as integral to the process of creating arts-based research (Diamond & Mullen, 1999). Barone and Eisner (1997) define arts-based research as investigation that creates believable realities and empathetic understandings through expressive and contextual language embedded in an aesthetic form that reflects the author’s stylistic signature. This often results in a narrative that may suggest new connections and alternative explanations. According to Barone (2005), arts-based research is best when it challenges and analyzes taken-for-granted assumptions.

Arts-based research often takes the form of thematic narratives about personally significant events. Marilyn Zurmuehlen (1987) encouraged her students to write such narratives to develop meaningful research topics. Zurmuehlen maintained that writing narratives is an act of the imagination that gathers fragmented experiences into patterns that provide a way of experiencing and valuing meaning, while it helps individuals find the power of their voices.

Recently, Bolin (2005) encouraged educators to tell personal stories about significant material culture experiences and objects to gain insights into how we learn from them and how they help give meaning to our lives. Bolin proposed that by analyzing one’s stories, we gain a better understanding of the elements that shaped our lives.

In the past, researchers had many taken-for-granted standards of analysis, but today we can analyze our learning experiences with new postmodern lenses such as race, gender, culture and class (Richardson, 1997). With these lenses, one can learn about alternative perceptions.
of relationships between signs and experience (Kincheloe, Slattery, & Steinberg, 2000). At the risk of becoming too self-indulgent, I will describe and analyze some of my early encounters with material culture for better self-understanding and self-knowledge.

**Context**

Before focusing on my reflections, I will “set the stage” by describing the context, place (Kincheloe & Pinar, 1991), and history of my early material culture encounters. Art educators such as Blandy and Hoffman (1993), Hicks (1990), McFee (1961), and Neperud (1995) have all discussed the relevance of context and place and its effect on cultural understanding of art and artifacts. The concept of place encompasses not only a physical environment, but also, the sociopolitical values and history of the people who inhabit it. Knowing about place provides understanding of forces that influenced the learning of those who live in a particular place. Art and artifacts take on their meaning in relation to place, and learning from specific pieces of material culture would be different in a different place.

I found my early material culture learning on Chicago’s southwest side, mostly within a 5-mile radius of my home. My home was located in the now historic Morgan Park-Beverly Hills neighborhood, a former stand-alone community before the City of Chicago began annexing it in 1890 (Pacyga & Skerrett, 1986). Originally, my neighborhood was a retreat for citizens who wanted a small-town atmosphere away from the big city.

As documented by Oswald (2003), with the assistance of the Ridge Historical Society, the Beverly Hills-Morgan Park area of Chicago was located 12-13 miles southwest of the downtown area known as the Loop. From the earliest days of the community, the area symbolized upward mobility, first for white Anglo-Saxon Protestants and later for Irish Roman Catholics and African Americans. Shortly before 1900, W. M. R. French, the first director of The Art Institute of Chicago, settled in Beverly, and about the same time, William Rainey Harper, the first president of the University of Chicago, lived in Morgan Park.

Although prominent architects, such as Frank Lloyd Wright, designed many area homes, it was not until the 1940s and 1950s that builders began developing remaining farmland with new homes, parks, golf courses, shopping malls, and theaters. New homes built after 1941 were mostly Chicago-style bungalows (see Figure 1). During the time of my childhood, there were roughly 30,000 people living in the combined area. In the 1950s, Beverly was 99% Anglo, and Morgan Park was 65% Anglo and 35% African American (Chicago Historical Society, 2005).
As noted in our family photo album, my parents, who were both in their late 30s, married in 1940 and purchased a bungalow in the area the following year. My mother was a lifetime Chicagoan who grew up on Chicago’s west side, just outside Oak Park. She attended Chicago Public Schools before going to the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign in the 1920s. After a couple of years, my mother returned to Chicago for financial reasons where she found employment in the Loop as a legal stenographer. My mother’s attention to detailed business contracts and ethical relationships was something that came naturally because of her work experience and family background, respectively.

After completing an apprenticeship in Germany, my father immigrated to Chicago via ship (Norddeutscher Lloyd, 1926) and train, where he was employed as a skilled craftsman, initially at International Harvester, and later at the Chrysler Corporation. With his Dresden cultural education, he had an appreciation for music, fine art, crafts, nature, and the environment as evidenced by his participation in Chicago area art and environmental organizations. Possibly, because of these interests, a college friend described my father as a romantic. Once I was born, my father supported his family by practicing his trade, while my mother worked in the home and volunteered for various civic organizations.

Photographs my father took in the home and community, with his Zeiss Ikon rangefinder camera, appear in family photo albums and they document his interests and my social and physical development. In addition to my father’s photographs, I studied images of all types in magazines and books. I found additional items that caught my attention among the many objects in our basement and attic.

4 According to Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swidler, & Tipton (1985), a community is a group of people who are socially interdependent, who participate together in discussion and decision making, and who share certain practices that both define community and are nurtured by it. We can define groups in terms of geography, ethnicity, gender, or economic and educational levels.
Stories

Having looked at the social context and physical location of my formative years, I will present reflective stories that offer how I encountered, experienced, and used examples of material culture as a youngster growing up in Chicago. Pinar (1975, 1994) explored how we can analyze what he calls currere, or our lived experiences of learning through personal narrative. Pinar offered that meaning comes from our analysis of the relationship between signs and experience. In this regard, analysis of our material culture encounters can result in a richer understanding of our assumptions and personal interactions with objects in the environment.

According to Ross-Bryant (1981), “The embodiment of a person's life in story occurs on the boundary between the unique and the universal” (pp. 113-114). My personal stories provide examples of topics and methods that others can use to analyze their own interactions with material culture. Based on family photographs or other artifacts as noted, each episode consists of my descriptions and reflections concerning my encounters. Employing this method of description and analysis, I am able to understand the material culture of my youth more fully.

Children’s Books

My earliest recollections flow from the books that my parents read to me before I could read them to myself. I insisted that my parents reread one children’s book about chewing gum (Clark Brothers Chewing Gum Company, 1944) many times (see Figure 2). My analysis of the book indicates that it had about 40 pages that included an equal amount of text and colored illustrations. In the book, little elves or pixies went to the forest to extract syrup from trees. Later they transported the syrup to buildings where machines processed it for distribution. Pictures of pink gum that wound over pulleys and down conveyer belts fascinated me.

In reviewing my childhood experience with the book, I will never forget my father's steadfast second-language effort in reading the book to me. As I thought about the contents of the book, I surmised that it was a public relations venture for chewing gum. While the designers may have wanted to promote chewing gum, I saw in the book’s illustrations an example of industrial production, and I contemplated the possibility that one could make machines to convert a variety of raw materials into consumable products.

In short, the book reaffirmed the ethics and interests of a great manufacturing city with its steel mill, meatpacking, and merchandising industries. With my father’s example of working at the Chrysler Corporation, I became a modernist like my parents, believing in the potential of industrial production and related vocational endeavors. In this way, the pictures in my children’s book, combined with my social environment, helped me see beyond the virtues of chewing gum.
Material culture did not always reinforce cultural norms for me, however. Images of soldiers and civilians that I encountered in *Life* magazine at my grandparents’ second story flat on Chicago’s west side invoked in me a horror of war and a desire for peaceful solutions, an idea that was out of step with 1950s America.

*Life Magazine*

*Figure 2. The Adventures of Tommy Teaberry.*
Recently, after re-reviewing *Life* magazines from the 1940s, it is apparent that most of the photographs I saw exhibited the gallant efforts of U.S. soldiers and civilians preparing for war, but a few pictures portrayed the reality of death and destruction. My 1940s encounter with the black-and-white images of gory dead bodies was possibly the first time that I considered the finality of death and the horrors of war. The topic of death was dreadful to me. Perhaps this was because of the education that I received in the home from my parents and the sheltering that was evident when my grandfather suggested that I look at more age-appropriate materials and engage in personally expressive activities.

Although memories of the photographs were troubling to me in terms of human mortality and the fragility of life, I gradually realized that I could refrain from dwelling on these matters by using readily available tools and materials for building and making. Fortunately, my parents gave me free reign with regard to constructive play activities. Thus, my experience with photographs, combined with social clues, guided my thoughts and behaviors at an early age.

**Toys**

Prior to attending school, my visual and material culture consisted of an array of toy cars, trucks, trains, and blocks, as well as Tinkertoys®, Lincoln Logs®, and Erector® set parts. In addition, my father made several wooden toys for me including a telephone, steam shovel, and wagon, as well as animals, blocks, riding train cars, and a toy boat that I still have today.

Many authors, including Wagner-Ott (2002), Calvert (1998), and Bolin (1992), have written about the significance of toys in the lives of young people. Motivation for my father’s toymaking activities could have been values that he learned in Germany (Calvert, 1998) and his objections to the purchase of military toys in local stores. With the toys that my parents provided, I constructed new objects and environments, and I learned of my parents’ values and skills.

As documented in the family photo album, I attempted to imitate my father’s toymaking efforts (see Figure 3). Fortunately, we had an abundance of scrap wood in the basement and I found more wood in nearby buildings that were under construction. As I worked with the tools and materials that I found, I taught myself much about fabricating, shaping, and finishing many standard building materials.

Through this activity, I began to feel a sense of accomplishment and I “bonded” more closely with adults in my life who were also good at making and building. Thus, the interaction of adults and the material culture of toys had an effect on me.
Other material culture inspired me to develop my imagination about future endeavors and it provided models for what I might build. The aim of much modern art education came to me through *Boys’ Life*. As an adolescent Boy Scout, I enjoyed pictures and articles in *Boys’ Life*, the official publication of the Boy Scouts of America. Articles about the natural environment, physical fitness, leadership, adventure, and being prepared were the hallmarks of the magazine. Illustrated articles made me think about the possibility of adventure and survival in the wilderness and I endeavored to imitate many of the activities presented. In one issue, I found sequential pictures that showed how to build a canoe from orange crate wood (Hunt, 1956). After studying the visuals and accompanying article, I knew that I wanted to build a canoe like the one described in the magazine.

I purchased and gathered most of the needed materials and I assembled the 16-foot structure in a few weeks. After letting others know of my intentions, Scout leaders provided wood saw horses to support the structure during construction, and several gallons of airplane paint to seal the outer canvas shell. Friends helped me take it to the Des Plaines River, and while somewhat awkward to paddle and maneuver, it stayed afloat. Photographs that I still have today documented my construction and flotation of the canoe (see Figure 4).
Having reflected on my canoe-making experiences, I can see that I learned from the images in Boys’ Life. My activity helped me exhibit my skills, become a respected member of a social group, and put into practice the magazine’s goals and objectives. Had I not been a Boy Scout, or not been in an environment that supported my activity, I might never have built a canoe. My community, family, and gender had an effect on me in the way that I used images from Boys’ Life.

Home and Community Art

In the communities where I lived, learned, and socialized, my privileged status gave me great access to art and art education. In my environment, I encountered many pieces of what I believed to be “real art.” In addition to the Japanese relief prints that hung on living room walls, I observed art at Sutherland Elementary School, and the local Ridge Park Fieldhouse, as well as at The Art Institute of Chicago.6

In each of these locations, I studied the subjects and techniques of the art. I could appreciate the local school and gallery art for its skillful and stylistic rendering of genre and romantic landscape images by artists such as Grant Wood and John H. Vanderpoel. Later, while taking Saturday art classes at The Art Institute of Chicago, I noticed the Mondrian-like paintings were different from what I had experienced earlier in my elementary school and the Ridge Park Fieldhouse. I wondered who made them and how they became a part of the collection.

In addition, I also contemplated figurative and landscape mural images at church where I noticed differences in subject matter from what I viewed in galleries and museums. While looking at the huge mural behind the church choir, I learned about the Good Shepherd, salvation, and eternal life, which were difficult to envision given the dreadful pictures I encountered earlier in Life magazine.

Although the visual imagery of the large mural was supportive of church teachings, I began to understand from previous experiences with material culture that ideas presented symbolically by others required imagination and real leaps of faith. Here again, my social and physical environment made a difference in the objects that I saw and the questions that I asked.

Analysis

Although teachers often ask students to write stories about past events from memory, my stories are different from most in that I based them on artifacts that I preserved or reconstructed through archival research. Even though my material culture encounters happened many years ago, it is strong emotions experienced at the time of an event that influence the remembering and forgetting process (Rosen, 1998). The material culture memories that I had are still vivid to me because of my strong feelings about them.

---

6In the local park district fieldhouse, I observed a 500-piece collection (John H. Vanderpoel Art Association, 1939) that local citizens donated in honor of John H. Vanderpoel (1958) who lived in the community and had a distinguished reputation as an author, painter, and head instructor at The Chicago Art Institute. My elementary school had a smaller but similar collection.
In addition to describing my memories of material culture, I have reflected on them by relating them to the local and greater social context of the time. Furthermore, I told how my encounters might have affected me (Mitchell & Weber, 1999). Although I did not use a formal structured process for my analysis, having reflected on my memories in terms of the social context and their implications, I can more clearly evaluate my strong memories of material culture and its role in my life.

Even though material culture initially represents the values of others, it is often race, culture, and class found in a particular place that affects what young children see, and how they use such material culture in their lives. Although I did not always appreciate it at the time, my parents provided in the home an abundance of books, toys, materials, and tools and they introduced me to a variety of supportive communities where I also had the opportunity to interact with material culture.

My parents introduced me to social environments that were reflective of their backgrounds, histories, and their reactions to current and historical events. Having survived the Great Depression of the 1930s, my parents kept themselves busy with their work in support of the family, and I imitated their behaviors with my building and making activities. As a child born at the beginning of WW II, my parents encouraged me to entertain myself and they often left me alone to pursue individual endeavors.

While waiting for all-school programs to begin, I studied the paintings provided by previous graduation classes in my elementary school’s assembly hall gallery. Once I was back in my designated classroom, my second grade teacher included art in each academic content area. She was the first to recommend that I take art classes at the Ridge Park Fieldhouse. The local park house accommodated theater, musical, artistic, and athletic activities (Chicago Park District, 2007). Local community members were supportive and instrumental in their development (Oswald, 2003), and I grew within this and other social and material culture environments.

Although the environment of a place provides a framework for individual development, there are other factors at work in individual growth. As noted by Denzin and Lincoln (2000), people experience and read their material culture in a way that is personal and possibly unique and enriching to them. While some individually respond to their environments with linguistic or mathematical abilities, I responded through artistic means. From the many influences in my life, I valued some experiences and disregarded others. In the end, I chose to respond to selected pieces of material culture with my building and making activities because this matched my abilities and facilitated my social development.
As a young adult, I chose to move away from the community of my formative years. Although I sometimes feel a love-hate relationship with my past and the environment of my youth, I find in reflection that I took for granted the environment that provided examples and support for my artistic growth. Having distanced myself from my youth and reflected on various pieces of material culture in my childhood environment, I can now appreciate and understand my development more fully than in the past. Although it may not have been my parents’ goal, they helped me become an art educator. It has been a long trip from my encounter with *The Adventures of Tommy Teaberry* (Clark Brothers Chewing Gum Company, 1944) to my status in life today. Based on my reflections, I can say that material culture suggests, but does not determine, our lives in the arts, whether we proclaim ourselves students or teachers.

**Conclusions**

Using the methods outlined by Nash (2004), Atkinson (2001), and Ellis and Bochner, (2000), art educators can encourage learners to make connections between their material cultures and the personal interpretations that they make through social interaction. By employing this method of personal investigation, students will create greater self-understanding and self-knowledge. As students learn about their interpretation and use of material culture, they become more aware of how they derive meaning from these objects and how they use them to shape their lives.

This article challenges others in the field to undertake similar reflective approaches to helping students discover the personal meaning of objects. This article also helps teachers understand how social class privilege affects one’s interpretations and uses of these objects. Through storytelling, we can learn about one’s assumptions and the meanings that material culture gains through social interaction. Such analysis in the classroom holds the promise of empowering students to understand their material worlds, as well as themselves and their relationships with others.

**References**


Reflections on Visual and Material Culture


