
From “attics” to “yard sales” and from “adolescence” to “shopping centers and shopping malls,” the 193 entries in Material Culture in America: Understanding Everyday Life offer a glimpse into material culture in the United States over the past four hundred years. An introductory overview defines material culture studies in the United States. As the editors state in the introduction, “it is not yet possible within the confines of one volume to account for, describe, and discuss the full wealth of material culture created, used, and altered by various groups in the American experience” (xvii). This volume instead sets out to cover three aspects of the field of material culture. First, it describes the scholarly disciplines that incorporate material culture into their study of American history and society. Covering theoretical issues, methodologies, and professional practice, entries in this category include “anthropology and archaeology,” “disability and disability studies,” and “social history.” Second, there are entries that relate to the “stuff” and aspirations of material culture: “funerary (sepulchral) monuments,” “mobile homes and trailer parks,” and “religious dress.” Third are entries that address aspects of the human experience with respect to material culture, for example, “adulthood,” “poverty,” and “rite, ritual, and ceremony.”

The alphabetically arranged entries range from one to six pages in length, with the majority about two pages. Entries are signed and include cross references and a brief list of references and further readings. Contributors include faculty, graduate students, and museum professionals; however, a substantial number of entries were authored by one of the co-editors. Stock photos illustrate the text. The fifty-two page bibliography is arranged by topic and/or type of material, including categories such as “theory and methodology,” “journals,” and “social, cultural, and ethnographic approaches.” The work ends with a detailed index.

Entries are interesting to read and one can learn snippets of information about the freegan movement, the history of sex toys, the invention of the carpet sweeper, or the appearance of the mass-produced toilet paper roll. While the scholarship is fine, the selection criteria are unclear, and many entries emphasize material culture of the past hundred years, not the full spectrum of American history. There is no comparable encyclopedia of American material culture, but the brevity of many entries, and the selection of topics and the exclusion of others (why “plainness, Quaker” and not “Shakers”), leaves one holding a rather Spartan and eclectic “map of American material culture and its study” (xvii).

Reference works with more substantive essays on many of these topics include Encyclopedia of American Social History (Scribner, 1993), Encyclopedia of the United States in the Nineteenth Century, (Scribner, 2001), Encyclopedia of American Studies (Grolier, 2001), and the Greenwood Guide to American Popular Culture (Greenwood, 2002), as well as specialized encyclopedias such as the Oxford Encyclopedia of Food and Drink in America (Oxford Univ. Pr., 2004). For example, the Greenwood Guide to American Popular Culture covers only fifty-eight topics, but the chapter-length essays on “games and toys” and “foodways” go into far greater historical detail than the two-page entries in Material Culture in America. An encyclopedia covering four hundred years of American “stuff” ought to have more volumes and include a much wider range of topics in greater historical depth. A raison d’être for this reference work never seems to materialize, making Material Culture in America: Understanding Everyday Life an optional purchase for academic libraries supporting programs in material culture or American Studies.—J. Christina Smith, Anthropology/Sociology Bibliographer, Boston University, Boston, Massachusetts


New Encyclopedia of Africa is the successor to The Encyclopedia of Africa South of the Sahara (Scribner, 1997) also edited