

Fields of the Future

A Podcast by Bard Graduate Center

Episode 6: Sarah Anne Carter—Making History with Things

Recorded: October 27, 2020 | Released: February 2, 2021

Transcript

Introduction: This is Fields of the Future. An interview series by Bard Graduate Center that highlights the work of scholars, artists, and writers who are changing the way we think about the material world. In this episode Ivan Gaskell speaks to curator and historian Sarah Anne Carter about how objects illuminate hidden histories, the importance of collaboration and interdisciplinarity in curation, teaching, and writing, and the central role objects can play in learning.

Ivan Gaskell: Hello. My name is Ivan Gaskell and I'm professor of cultural history and museum studies at Bard Graduate Center. I'm delighted to be joined by Sarah Anne Carter. Until recently, Sarah was curator and director of research at the Chipstone Foundation, Milwaukee, and is now visiting executive director of the center for design and material culture and visiting assistant professor in design studies at the University of Wisconsin–Madison. And the first question I'd like to ask you, Sarah, is what is your relationship to objects?

Sarah Anne Carter: Well, objects are, for me, really important sources of knowledge and ideas, and have been really central to my research practice for a long time. And I would say it's central to the way in which I think about learning and engaging with the world probably for my entire academic career, even going back to when I was a very small child learning through objects in Montessori school. But thinking about how through my undergraduate years at Harvard, learning about objects in the context of an American history degree, thinking about my time in the Winterthur Program for American Material Culture where I thought about object connoisseurship and how we could closely study objects to glean information about everyday lives of a whole diverse range of individuals. And of course, thinking about objects and material things as central to American studies scholarship and thinking about objects as ways that you could understand connections between past, present, and future, thinking about people whose voices might not always be reflected in more traditional historical sources like texts. And of course, working for many years now as a curator thinking about how objects become central ways, not just to create and write and produce meaningful history that builds connections across time and across cultures, and around the world, but also a way to connect those stories to individuals who also engage with those objects and have the potential to open up worlds in front of them that they may not have had access to with other kinds of historical documents.

Ivan Gaskell: Well, that's an awful lot of thinking about how to use objects as well as your own personal relationship to objects. But you're an historian. And how is your approach to making history affected by attention to material things? Can material things take us to places in the past that are not accessible by other means?

Sarah Anne Carter: Absolutely. And material things, objects are able to do that because they are created by everyone. Material traces of the past are everywhere, not just captured in an archive and traditional archive, that's a text-based archive. We can find objects that can open up windows onto historical stories in a whole range of places. Yes, in museums, yes, perhaps in historic sites, but also in the landscape around us, in the material traces of the past that we can see when we move through the

world. So as an historian, I think a lot about how objects can open up much wider possibilities for historical storytelling. Objects can help us access places and people and stories and situations that are very difficult to access through “traditional written sources.” You could take a look at a chair and you could begin to understand how might this seventeenth-century chair help us understand the person who carved and created it, the person who wanted this object in their home, the person who harvested this wood, whether free or enslaved. This object could open up a series of relationships. An object can open up almost countless live stories that you could begin to imagine with the different processes and possibilities of that thing. And so the study of objects becomes this really exciting way to begin to reimagine connections across and through time. And for me, that's central to the work of an historian. You're thinking about how do I understand change over time? How do I understand a particular historical moment? Well, material things are often these fascinating material witnesses to those historical moments. And in engaging with them and studying them, you can begin to think about a whole network of ideas and connections and possibilities swirling around any given thing in a particular moment. The challenge is of course, accessing that information, asking the right questions, talking to a range of colleagues who could help you ask and answer those questions. But the thing itself can often provide a great deal of information if you know how to look at it and you know how to engage with it. And as an historian, that's incredibly exciting because suddenly you're no longer limited by a traditional text-based archive, but a new set of worlds can open in front of you if you're able to access them.

Ivan Gaskell: So the written word is really not enough in order to get a fuller picture of the past and the relationships among people in the past and between the past and the present, which is what historians do. Historians create a relationship between the present and the past. So if we can use things as well as the written word, we can go to more places and listen to more people. Is that really what is lying behind your methods?

Sarah Anne Carter: That's exactly right. And if you're able to listen to more people or to find evidence of more people's lived experience, then you're truly able to tell a truer or more accurate or more full and more nuanced story about the past.

Ivan Gaskell: And bring more people into the picture.

Sarah Anne Carter: Yes.

Ivan Gaskell: Now, you're an Americanist. Does the North American past lead itself to study through material things in ways different from other parts of the world? Is there a tradition of this kind of scholarship in North America that might be absent or perhaps not so highly developed in other parts of the world?

Sarah Anne Carter: As an Americanist, there is a long history of thinking about using objects as historical sources. And in a lot of ways, I think about this as intimately connected to the colonial revival and to national storytelling. And it's often very difficult to separate this kind of national storytelling, these various colonial revival projects that help us access and understand the past in a particularly American context. And those projects are often really quite interesting to engage with because of course, they are yes, about history, but they're also very much about a particular vision of American history through the study of objects so that's often... or historically that has often been a vision very closely connected to a national project of erasing Indigenous traces of the past, or making a clear argument about what it means to be "American," making a very clear argument about what it means to be from a place and to really tell a colonial story about what it means to inhabit this land that is now the United States of

America. And so as a scholar who's thinking about American history, particularly through a material lens, that poses some really interesting challenges and opportunities. Because I am and have been for many years quite interested in thinking about storytelling around nation and histories of the colonial revival and layered ways of thinking about the past through the study of objects. But of course, you are just as thinking about a textual archive, you are not looking through a neutral set of sources or a neutral set of, in our case, material things. You're looking through objects that have often been selected to tell a particular kind of story about the past. And so when thinking about material culture from an explicitly American perspective, it's vital to be attentive to asking questions about Indigenous lives and stories. It's vital to be asking questions about who is included in this material archive and who isn't just as we might when thinking about a textual archive. And it's also vital to think really broadly and diversely about that archive. Where are you going to look for material sources? Whose stories are you trying to find captured? Even in a traditional Western style archive, how might you be able to find a whole range of objects that open up really diverse stories about the past, about voices that are not necessarily expected to be present, but indeed there are objects that tell a whole range of stories even beyond what might be seen or might have been seen in the past as a normative story about a particular vision of American history. I hesitate to say that this is particular to a North American context in the sense that there is also a whole range of other contexts, national storytelling that takes place through objects and obviously through archives, traditional and untraditional archives, but I do believe that there are some really interesting aspects of exploring this through a particularly colonial revival lens in a US context, because there are so many museums that were founded in that context. There were so many museums that were founded in a colonial revival vein that those often are places to look to to think about national storytelling.

Ivan Gaskell: I couldn't agree with you more about the importance of colonial revival in this whole endeavor in North America. But I'm also wondering about the role of historical archeology, which is something that has grown in North America perhaps before it took off elsewhere. And I wonder if you have any thoughts about that role of historical archeology.

Sarah Anne Carter: When we think about some of the peculiar ways or particular ways in which material culture might be studied in an American context, in a North American context, we can of course think about the layered impacts of the colonial revival across time, we can think about national storytelling that becomes a vital way to think about the study of material culture in the United States and something to work against and just think through as a critical lens for trying to understand the objects that survive in archives in a US context. But perhaps more powerfully, there's another tradition that we can look to as well, particular to a North American context, at least initially. And that's the study of practice of historical archeology and thinking about how we might look to archeological contexts to quite literally unearth patterns and stories and people whose lives would not survive, not only in a paper archive, but who might not survive in the kinds of objects that could be found to sit on museum shelves. And particularly in an historical archeological context through the work of people like James Deetz, we can think through the kinds of material patterns that can be traced in the earth, the shards we can find and count, the pipe stems we can measure and count, the material traces of the past, and truly just traces, can be put together to tell really big stories. And that's a really important contribution that we can think about when we're trying to understand what it means to study material things in a US context in particular.

Ivan Gaskell: Now, you've had two scholarly roles in your career as an historian, curator and professor. With respect to studying material culture, what do they have in common and what divides them?

Sarah Anne Carter: As you say, I've had two scholarly roles in my career, I've been a professor and I've been a curator. And those two roles are very closely related for me. And in fact, it's often hard for me to pull them apart because I see in so many instances the work that I'm doing in the classroom or in my more traditional research and writing is intimately related to the work that I do as a curator and vice versa. And I've had this great privilege of teaching a whole range of museum based classes and thinking about how exhibitions could directly grow out my research and the research of my students. And in that process, it's become so clear to me and hopefully clear to my colleagues who might not be working through exhibitions, who aren't working through objects, how vitally important and how interrelated the deep scholarly research of the university is to the kinds of work that we do in galleries and exhibitions. And that is a really exciting and important connection. Because just because something doesn't look like a traditional scholarly article doesn't mean that it is not making a vital historical argument about the past and its relationship to the present. And part of what's so exciting about doing this work in an exhibition context is you are tracing that relationship from past to present, but also as soon as someone walks out of the gallery having looked at and engaged with your objects on display, read your text, thought critically about the arguments and questions you're posing, you're building a connection between past, present, and future. And that act of synthesis and that act of connection and that ways of thinking about empowering visitors to engage with historical sources and stories I think is really vital work.

Ivan Gaskell: You're making a terrific case here for what we might call integrated scholarship, both academic work and curatorial scholarship. I'd like to move on to ask you about your 2018 book, *Object Lessons: How Nineteenth-Century Americans Learned to Make Sense of the Material World* and how this, it seems to me, shows that you care a lot about the history of making knowledge claims from the study of material things. Modes of teaching and learning have changed considerably since the nineteenth century, the topic of your book. Thinking of the teaching methods you study in that book, how much has been lost? Or let me put it another way, has as much been lost in the present as has been gained?

Sarah Anne Carter: I would say a great deal has been lost when objects are removed from the classroom for young children, for teenagers, as well as for college students and graduate students. When I hear you ask this question, Ivan, about what might be lost and what might be gained, I have to think about one of my own really powerful learning experiences that actually took place in a Harvard graduate seminar that I took almost 20 years ago that was team taught by you and Laurel Ulrich. And I think about this really quite fascinating afternoon in which you brought in the Great Salt, which is this really quite remarkable seventeenth-century object, remarkable for its survival, remarkable for the fact that it is at Harvard, this seventeenth-century silver salt. And it was an object that was placed in front of a room full of undergraduates. And we were asked, what is it? What do you know, what can you know, how would you begin to find that out? And in this process of engaging with something that none of us had ever seen, we were forced to think about what is accidental versus essential in terms of what this thing is, why does it look this way? How might it have been used? What questions can we ask about this? How would we know? Where would we go? And that kind of learning experience is an uncomfortable experience for students who are accustomed to being able to read a text and find an answer, or read a few texts, make some connections, and make an argument. When you're engaging with material things, you're really forced oftentimes to be in a place of truly not knowing and thinking about where do I need to go to find this information? How can I build a hypothesis around this thing but I don't know what it is? And that is an incredibly powerful learning experience because it is asking a student to go to a place of discomfort, and through that discomfort, and through that close looking, to begin to develop a series of ideas about the world, to test those ideas and to then go back to that object and test those ideas again. And these are vital skills that need to be taught at all levels. And objects are very powerful ways to do

that kind of teaching work because the thing itself cannot be something that you push away. You can't just come up with an alternate truth in relation to that concrete thing sitting in front of you. You can't say this object is not actually made of silver, it's made of something else. It's there in front of you and you have to deal with its realities. And those concrete realities and possibilities, whether accidental or essential, can connect to really big ideas and can give you access to ideas about histories of worldview, ideology, making that you would not have access to otherwise. And that's a really powerful and exciting way to think about teaching with objects.

Ivan Gaskell: That's a really eloquent explanation of how this kind of work can be so important, and not just for history concentrators, but for anyone and also at any age. And that this is why curatorial work can be so important because you can bring this kind of attention to things for people at any stage of their lives from kindergartners through to seniors. So it would really be, I think, crazy not to acknowledge that we do know each other pretty well. Having worked together on two books, *Tangible Things* with our friends and colleagues, Laurel Thatcher Ulrich and Sara Schechner, and then the two of us recently published *The Oxford Handbook of History and Material Culture* earlier in 2020. So I wonder whether you think that material culture history benefits from collaborative methods that may not be quite so prevalent in other areas of historical scholarship.

Sarah Anne Carter: Material culture work doesn't just benefit from collaborative methods, it really requires collaboration because the study of objects is something that requires multiple perspectives and multiple skill sets. So you might work closely with the curator responsible for an object, collection managers who can help you find things that you might not even know exist, conservation scientists, conservators, restorers, contemporary makers who can help you understand the material quality of the things that you're looking at. You could also engage closely with a whole range of diverse community members from the cultures and contexts that you're studying. There's so many different kinds of knowledge that connect to material things, so many different categories and ways of knowing, and so many different ways to describe "experts" in relation to objects. It is absolutely vital that you're working as part of a team and you're working collaboratively and you are trying to understand a thing from multiple perspectives. And I think that is one of, for me, the great pleasures of material culture research. As someone trained as a curator, as well as an historian, I find myself often working in teams and that's vital for putting on exhibitions. You can't do an exhibition by yourself, but it's also vital in terms of thinking about new pathways for humanities scholarship.

Ivan Gaskell: So being an historian doesn't have to be a lonesome activity. It's something you can do with other people and gain a great deal as a result. That's not the normal way of proceeding in the human sciences. And it seems to me to be a great advantage of material culture history. We've been talking about material things so far, which is of course what we both deal with, but I want to take us into a slightly different direction. So when considering the material world, how do the things that constitute it relate to what we might think of as immaterial factors? What is immaterial about material things?

Sarah Anne Carter: When looking closely at an object, you can think about the worldview of the person who created it, that ideology, that that object might stand in for or suggest the ways in which someone might use that thing, not just in a religious practice, but in everyday practice that suggests the shape of their daily lives. And indeed, in my own research, I think a lot about how objects can become containers for ideas in a whole variety of ways. How does an object become a tool for thinking? How does an object become a tool for remembering? How does an object become a tool for identifying someone as part of a certain community? How does an object become a tool for talking about a person as part of a particular family? I think it's very difficult to separate material things from all of these seemingly immaterial

qualities, but indeed they are part of those objects. And it becomes a central way to think about identity and the way one positions oneself in the world, both today and in the past.

Ivan Gaskell: I think this is a really important issue that you're describing here because all too often people think that material means limited and that the things to do with the intellect, to do with affect, with emotions, and to do with the numinous, really nothing to do with the material world, whereas in fact, of course they really are and these are just as important as the physical aspects of these things. Now thinking about some of these immaterial concerns, we're very exercised at present, of course, and have been for quite a long time with issues of social equity, with the demythologization, I love that word, the demythologization of the American past. That is asking radical questions about some of the most revered ideas about the past that seem to serve ideological purposes. So I'm wondering, thinking along these lines, does material culture history have anything unique, particular to contribute to the decolonization of history as a discipline?

Sarah Anne Carter: The study of material things absolutely contributes to the decolonization of history as a discipline because the study of objects takes us outside of traditional text-based archives and allows us to invite in a whole range of diverse stories. When we're able to study objects, particularly things that might be reflective of Indigenous communities in a US context, or a range of ethnic communities, or immigrant communities in the US, we're able to think about objects that can speak to stories that aren't always registered in other places. And in thinking about these objects, it also really demands that we invite in and honor a diverse range of "experts." And it asks us to really decenter, what does expert mean? Does an expert have to be someone who has an advanced degree? Is an expert someone who has published on a particular topic? And when we're thinking about objects that is not always the case. The study of material things really requires us to think about expert in a diverse and wide ranging way. And this is something that I've been able to see in some really powerful ways, even in my one year in the Center for Design and Material Culture being responsible for our textile collection. So for example, we did an exhibition last year called Intersections, which looked at textiles from across the Americas, Indigenous textiles from across the Americas. In this exhibition, collaborating with two native curators, we were able to really see our collection in a totally new way, working with a Diné weaver to study a saddle blanket from our collection, we learned things about that weaving, we learned things about that blanket that we never would have learned if it hadn't been this particular and quite remarkable weaver, Dakota Mace, who's also a photographer and artist, studying that object. She found a medicine bundle woven into the saddle blanket because she was approaching it from a deeply knowledgeable, culturally informed perspective as a Diné woman and a Diné artist and weaver herself.

Ivan Gaskell: I'd like to end with a final question. Following six successful years as curator and director of research at the Chipstone Foundation in Milwaukee, you are now assistant professor and executive director of the center for design and material culture at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. Does your experience in these various capacities suggest to you where fields of the future in material culture history might lie, thinking ahead?

Sarah Anne Carter: Thinking about this idea of fields of the future is actually quite interesting to me because what I've been thinking about a lot is actually this notion of trying to understand objects as time travelers and thinking about material things that exist in our museum collections as things that obviously are from oftentimes from a past time that exists in this presence, but that we're responsible for and thinking about what their lives and stories might look like in the future. And I've been thinking a lot about how objects make people feel and thinking about how objects can help us understand relationships across and through time and hopefully point to positive and meaningful questions that we

can ask about the future. So I've been thinking a lot about the effective qualities in museums and the new project that I'm working on right now is tentatively called "Museum Feelings" and is thinking about an emotional or an affective history of the American museum. And trying to understand how we can begin to unpack the actual experiences of individuals engaging with objects in museum context through time. And this is something that feels incredibly present and important right now as we're thinking hard about questions around diversity, equity, and inclusion in museums, and trying to understand how we can be attentive to the emotional work that happens in a museum setting and indeed how the emotional work that happens in a museum setting is closely related to a museum histories, is closely related to storytelling in museums, and around objects and material culture. And then due to something that we can think about going forward as ways to try to do some of the important cultural work of not just decolonizing the museum, or decolonizing the collection, but decolonizing and opening up the ways museums make visitors feel and trying to do that work as an historian, as someone interested in material culture scholarship, but also as someone kind of standing here in the world in 2020 and thinking hard about how the work that we do can open up new possibilities.

Ivan Gaskell: Well, that's wonderful. Thank you, Sarah. Very encouraging that there is a role for aesthetics in this kind of historical scholarship and that that role of aesthetics helps to broaden the attention of various public constituencies to the kind of work that you do. So Sarah Anne Carter, I'd like to thank you very much for joining me this morning to discuss the fields of the future and material culture history. Many thanks.

Sarah Anne Carter: Thank you so much, Ivan. Thanks for having me.

Fields of the Future is brought to you by Bard Graduate Center. Our producers are Emily Reilly and Laura Minsky. Art Direction by Jocelyn Lau. Sound design, editing, and composition by Palmer Hefferan. Special Thanks to Amy Estes, Jesse Merandy, Peter Miller, Stowe Nelson, Nadia Rivers, Susan Tane, Hellyn Teng, Maggie Walter, and Susan Weber.