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Introduction: Material Culture and Catholic History

MAUREEN C. MILLER*

After setting out some of the reasons Catholicism developed a rich array of devotional and liturgical objects, this introduction to the centennial special issue of The Catholic Historical Review on Catholic material culture traces a brief history of the emergence of material culture studies while noting the contributions of Catholic scholars to it. It also defines material culture and describes several of the field's approaches as exemplified by essays in the special issue. Strengths and weaknesses of these approaches are also noted.

Keywords: material culture, Catholicism, objects, artifacts

The Catholic tradition's engagement with material objects is rooted in the Gospels. Jesus changed water into wine, and multiplied loaves and fishes.¹ He taught through parables that imbued common objects with higher meanings: lamps and bushels, new patches on old cloaks, wineskins, and fishing nets.² When a woman seeking healing touched the hem of his garment, Jesus sensed "the power that had proceeded from him" through the fabric. His healing power was transmitted through material. Thus, many thereafter rushed to touch his garments and were also healed.³ At his last supper Jesus chose the most ubiquitous objects of the Mediterranean table—bread and a cup of wine—to institute the sacrament of his body and

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1. Jn 2:6–10; Mt 14:16–21, 15:34–36; Mk 6:38–43; Lk 9:13–17; Jn 6:5–12.

2. Mt 5:15, 25:1–13, 9:16–17, 13:47; Mk 4:21, 2:21–22; Lk 8:16, 5:36–37.

3. Mk 5:25–34, 6:56; Lk 8:44–48; Mt 9:20–21, 14:36.

blood.⁴ Material objects in the Gospels can lead individuals to sacred truths, can transmit divine power, and can be transformed into Christ.

Indeed, the mystery of the incarnation, the belief that God took on flesh and blood, becoming fully human while remaining fully God, had radical implications for Christian views of matter and the material. The new faith emerged in a diverse philosophical landscape, but one in which ambivalence or hostility toward matter was widely diffused. Strands of ancient Platonism and neo-Platonism opposed the higher and spiritual to the lower and material or fleshly, whereas Gnostics viewed the material world as the consequence of a primordial error, contaminating and constraining the spirit. The incarnation, of course, was at the root of the most difficult and contentious early Christian theological debates and did not yield uniformly positive attitudes toward flesh and matter.⁵ But by making matter part of God's plan of salvation, it valorized the use of material objects in Christianity.

These objects multiplied over the centuries. The liturgy came to employ chalices and patens of precious metals, candles and candleholders, bells and basins and cruets, altar coverings and ornamented frontals, sacred vestments, processional crosses and censers. Churches were furnished with pulpits and baldachins, altar railings and chancels, choir stalls and lecterns, papal and episcopal thrones, confessional booths and bronze-doors. The veneration of relics spurred the creation of myriad forms of reliquaries, from elaborate tombs to hold entire bodies to statues and busts representing the saint, to bejeweled cabinets, cases, and arks to secure and display fragments of holy persons. Private devotions fueled a remarkable proliferation of objects: ex votos, rosaries, medals and pilgrim badges, holy cards, plaques, and statues, to name just a few.⁶ Objects and their uses often sparked debate and attracted criticism, most notably during the Protestant Reformation of the sixteenth century. In response to critique, the Catholic Church sought to control, through sanction and censure, the faithful's use of objects. But it

4. Mt 26:26–29; Mk 14:22–25; Lk 22:19–20.

5. Mark Edwards, *Culture and Philosophy in the Age of Plotinus* (London, 2006), pp. 14–18, 48–57; Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Christian Tradition. A History of the Development of Doctrine, 1: The Emergence of the Catholic Tradition (100–600)* (Chicago, 1971), pp. 226–77; Hannah Hunt, *Clothed in the Body. Asceticism, the Body and the Spiritual in the Late Antique Era* (Farnham, UK, 2012), pp. 149–202; Caroline Walker Bynum, *Christian Materiality: An Essay on Religion in Late Medieval Europe* (New York, 2011), pp. 33–36, 260–65.

6. A visual introduction to this bounty is Anton Legner, ed., *Ornamenta ecclesiae: Kunst und Künstler der Romanik: Katalog zur Ausstellung des Schnütgen-Museums in der Josef-Haubrich-Kunsthalle, Köln, 1985*, 3 vols. (Cologne, 1985).

has never renounced the material and today's Church still utilizes a wide array of liturgical and devotional objects, many unique to Catholicism.

Art historians have long feasted on this abundance. But historians have privileged texts in reconstructing the past, and Catholicism has produced such an effusion of those that the ecclesiastical historian can easily revel in untapped archival sources. There is still much important Catholic history to be discovered and reconstructed from documents, manuscripts, and printed materials in archives and libraries all over the world. Still, Lucien Febvre's call for an inclusive, a multifaceted, approach to the past—*histoire totale*—remains a valid and galvanizing ideal. Historians can illuminate more aspects of the Catholic past by widening their source base to embrace the rich material culture that the Church has produced over two millennia.

This special issue of *The Catholic Historical Review*, part of the journal's centennial celebration, presents four articles illustrating the interpretive and pedagogical possibilities offered by material approaches. In my own experience as a historian, the direct encounter with objects and spaces created by believers hundreds of years ago has been revelatory and stimulating: it has forced me to confront how much I don't know and has helped me ask new kinds of questions. It has certainly taken me far out of my "comfort zone," but it has also introduced me to exciting new bodies of sources and to specialists in fields I didn't even know existed. While I think it has helped me produce more original scholarship, I know it has enlivened my classroom. For teaching the history of Catholicism, the objects and spaces of belief offer the most tangible points of entry to learners of all ages. I hope the catechist casting about for new resources to engage reluctant CCD students as well as the university teacher rethinking course offerings will find useful ideas, strategies, and bibliography here. Material culture can enrich the teaching, research, and writing of Catholic history.

What Is "Material Culture"?

In its most general sense, the study of material culture investigates the relationship between people and things; it focuses on objects as sources for human action and ideas. The relationship with people is key: describing and cataloging objects, comparing their forms and styles across time, for example, is *not* material culture, whereas using a change in style to investigate the human ideas and practices that drove that change is a study in material culture. This area of scholarship is interdisciplinary in origins and in contemporary practice, and scholars studying the Catholic tradition have contributed to its emergence as a vibrant field of inquiry.

The term *material culture* originated in anthropology in the late-nineteenth century. As early as 1875, the English archaeologist and ethnologist Augustus Pitt-Rivers advocated the consideration of “material culture” as “the outward signs and symbols of particular ideas in the mind.”⁷ In his archaeological work Pitt-Rivers pioneered the cataloging and study of all objects, rather than simply the beautiful or valuable ones, and in 1884 he established Oxford University’s anthropological museum with the gift of his personal collection of 22,000 objects. This emphasis on objects, particularly everyday objects, remains characteristic of work on material culture.

Although anthropology created the term, other disciplines were also using objects as sources for human ideas, and Catholic scholars contributed to these developments. Christian archaeology is a key example. Constantine’s mother, the empress Helena, might be credited with initiating the excavation of Christian antiquities in 325, and her discovery of the “true cross” certainly began a long tradition of searching for relics underground. But a more scientific study of Christian remains had its origins in the Renaissance and the humanistic study of biblical languages. Its earliest centuries were dominated by discoveries in the Roman catacombs, most interpreted piously and used apologetically. Still, Antonio Bosio (1573–1629) stands out as an early luminary of archaeologically-informed historical scholarship: his four-volume *Roma Sotteranea*, written in the opening decades of the seventeenth century and published posthumously from 1632 to 1634, weighed the evidence of patristic and medieval texts against the physical and visual evidence he explored in the Roman catacombs.⁸ The Enlightenment further advanced more dispassionate scholarship and the incorporation of material sources into the body of evidence used by historians. Johann von Mosheim’s *Institutionum historiae Christianae compendium* (1752) and Edward Gibbon’s *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (1776–88) were monuments of early attempts at “rational inquiry” into the development of Christianity, but it was mostly inscriptions—written texts imbedded within ecclesiastical

7. Thomas J. Schlereth, “Material Culture or Material Life: Discipline or Field? Theory or Method?,” in *Living in a Material World: Canadian and American Approaches to Material Culture*, ed. Gerald L. Pocius (St. John’s, Newfoundland, 1991), pp. 231–32. On Pitt-Rivers, see David K. van Keuren, “Museums and Ideology: Augustus Pitt-Rivers, Anthropological Museums, and Social Change in Late Victorian Britain,” *Victorian Studies*, 28 (1984), 171–89.

8. William H. C. Frend, *The Archaeology of Early Christianity: A History* (Minneapolis, 1996), pp. 1, 11–17; Gisella Wataghin Cantino, “Roma Sotterranea: Appunti sulle origini dell’archeologia cristiana,” *Ricerche di storia dell’arte*, 10 (1980), 5–14.

remains—that they incorporated from archaeological work. In the late-nineteenth century—particularly with the foundation by Giovanni Battista de Rossi (1822–94) of the *Bullettino di archeologia cristiana* in 1863⁹—and the early-twentieth century, however, a great number of new sites were excavated, opening new and unexpected avenues of research, particularly into dissident communities within early Christianity. Excavations in north Africa, the Balkans, Asia Minor, the Nile Valley, Nubia, Ethiopia, and Central Asia brought to light Christian churches and monasteries with attendant structures (cemeteries, baptisteries, *episcopio*, dormitories, refectories) as well as furnishings, decorative programs (mosaics, wall paintings), inscriptions, and caches of texts (from Egyptian *ostraka* and the Oxyrhynchus papyri to the precious codices of Nag Hammadi Gnostic texts). Great monuments of erudition inspired and facilitated by this decisive period of development in Christian archaeology are the *Dictionnaire d'archéologie chrétienne et de liturgie* (15 volumes, 1907–53), founded by the Benedictine monk Fernand Cabrol (1855–1937) but brought to completion by Henri Leclercq (1869–1945), and Franz Joseph Dölger's (1879–1940) periodical *Antike und Christentum* (continued from 1958 by the *Jahrbuch für Antike und Christentum*).¹⁰ Although these works did not characterize their enterprises as “material culture,” they used the material evidence unearthed by archaeologists along with texts in order to provide an interdisciplinary reconstruction of early Christian belief and practice.

Another discipline that contributed to the emergence of material culture studies is art history. Although the earliest steps toward the study of art as cultural history were taken by Johann Joachim Winckelmann (1717–68) in his later work on allegories and emblems in ancient Greek and Roman art, the establishment of this area of study in the nineteenth-century universities was critical in furthering cultural approaches. Some of the pioneers of iconography—Adolphe Napoléon Didron (1806–67), Émile Mâle (1862–1954)—were French Catholics dedicated to explicating the connections between medieval religious art and theology, concentrating particularly on Gothic cathedrals as expressions of scholasticism. But the theoretical foundations of iconography owe more to the work of the German art historians Aby Warburg (1866–1929) and Erwin Panofsky

9. Succeeded after G. B. de Rossi's death in 1895 by the *Nuovo bullettino di archeologia cristiana* and then by the Pontificia Commissione di archeologia sacra's *Rivista di archeologia cristiana* from 1924 to the present.

10. Frend, *Archaeology of Early Christianity*, pp. 35–36, 77–84, 108–69, 213–14, 325; a good, brief critical overview of the development of Christian archaeology is Kim Bowes, “Early Christian Archaeology: A State of the Field,” *History Compass*, 2 (2008), 575–619.

(1892–1968), both from wealthy Jewish families. Warburg’s broad visual interests prefigure those of material culture: he studied not only masterpieces, such as Botticelli’s *Birth of Venus*, but also everyday images on postage stamps, in newspaper illustrations, and in photographs.¹¹

Warburg also points to the origins within the historical discipline of interest in material sources. Early in his studies Warburg was attracted to the “new history” of Karl Lamprecht (1856–1915), an attempt to break out of the strictly political focus of academic history in Germany through *Kulturgeschichte*. Lamprecht had studied not only history and philosophy but also art history, and in his works he treated art and artifacts as aspects of culture to be investigated impartially along with society, economy, law, literature, and folkways. He also used artistic styles—the Symbolic, Typical, Conventional, Subjectivistic, and the Impressionistic—to structure the periodization of his *Deutsche Geschichte*.¹² This integration of art into grand theories of the evolution of civilization appealed to Warburg.¹³ Lamprecht’s premier work, *Deutsches Wirtschaftsleben im Mittelalter*, even used the phrase *material culture* in its descriptive subtitle: *Untersuchungen über die Entwicklung der materiellen Kultur des platten Landes auf Grund der Quellen, zunächst des Mosellandes*.¹⁴ This notion of material culture, however, was far broader than the meaning of the phrase dominant today: it included topography, natural resources, settlement, patterns of landholding, social organization, and legal institutions.¹⁵

Lamprecht disastrously fell from academic grace when vanquished during the *Methodenstreit*, a controversy within the German historical discipline in the 1890s between advocates of *Kulturgeschichte* and defenders of the orthodox conception of history focused on politics and the state. But social and economic history had established itself in the university curricu-

11. Aby Warburg, “Sandro Botticelli’s *Birth of Venus* and *Spring*,” in *The Renewal of Pagan Antiquity: Contributions to the Cultural History of the European Renaissance*, ed. Kurt W. Forster, trans. David Britt, [Getty Research Institute Texts and Documents], (Los Angeles, 1999), pp. 89–156; E. H. Gombrich, *Aby Warburg: An Intellectual Biography* (Chicago, 1970; 2nd ed. 1986), pp. 19–24, 263–69; Michael Ann Holly, *Panofsky and the Foundations of Art History* (Ithaca, NY, 1984), pp. 26–42, 110–12, 161–67.

12. Roger Chickering, *Karl Lamprecht. A German Academic Life (1856–1915)* (Atlantic Highlands, NJ, 1993), pp. 37–54, 87–94, 117–20.

13. Gombrich, *Aby Warburg*, pp. 30–37.

14. Karl Lamprecht, *Deutsches Wirtschaftsleben im Mittelalter. Untersuchungen über die Entwicklung der materiellen Kultur des platten Landes auf Grund der Quellen, zunächst des Mosellandes*, 3 vols. (Leipzig, 1885–86).

15. Chickering, *Karl Lamprecht*, pp. 75–76, 81–83.

lum and continued to develop interest in material artifacts such as coins and fortifications. In the interwar period, socioeconomic history in France spawned a more enduring challenge to the dominance of politics and the state within historical research: the foundation in 1929 of the journal the *Annales d'histoire économique et sociale* by Marc Bloch (1886–1944) and Lucien Febvre (1878–1956). The journal's critiques of traditional historical writing and methodology, as well as the capacious interests and goals of the founders, went well beyond advocacy for social and economic history, and in 1946 its title was broadened to that which it still bears today: *Annales: Economies, sociétés, et civilisations*. The *Annales* school championed an inclusive view of the past. History should investigate all parts of society and all aspects of human experience; it should aspire to *histoire totale*.¹⁶

The rise of the *Annales* most directly contributed to the emergence of material culture in two ways. First, under the leadership of Fernand Braudel (1902–85) in the postwar era, the material conditions structuring human existence came to the fore as well as an emphasis on ordinary people and everyday life. This notion of the material, although not as capacious as Lamprecht's, was still broad, encompassing the physical landscape, food and clothing, shelter, furnishings, and tools and implements of all sorts. The emphasis on economic history and the quotidian generated immense interest in consumption and, to the degree that such studies considered the things consumed, strongly shaped the study of material culture in the modern period.¹⁷ Although much of Braudel's own work—even his *Les Structures du Quotidien: Le Possible et L'Impossible* published in 1979—

16. A very brief introduction to the *Annales* is in Martha Howell and Walter Prevenier, *From Reliable Sources: An Introduction to Historical Methods* (Ithaca, NY, 2001), pp. 110–18; for an appreciative history, see François Dosse, *New History in France: The Triumph of the Annales*, trans. Peter V. Conroy Jr. (Urbana, 1994), pp. 7–36 (esp. pp. 32–33); for a more critical view, see André Burguière, *L'École des Annales: Une histoire intellectuelle* (Paris, 2006), esp. 23–33, 167–98; for a critical appraisal of the impact of the *Annales* on the history of Christianity, see John Van Engen, “The Christian Middle Ages as an Historiographical Problem,” *American Historical Review*, 91 (1986), 519–52.

17. Dosse, *New History*, pp. 89–90, 109–115, 144–46; Daniel Miller, *Material Culture and Mass Consumption* (Oxford, 1987); Lisa Jardine, *Worldly Goods: A New History of the Renaissance* (New York, 1996); Michael Ashkenazi and John Clammer, *Consumption and Material Culture in Contemporary Japan* (London, 2000); Martin Daunton and Matthew Hilton, eds., *The Politics of Consumption: Material Culture and Citizenship in Europe and America* (Oxford, 2001); Robert Ross, Marja Hinfelaar, and Iva Pesa, eds., *The Objects of Life in Central Africa: The History of Consumption and Social Change, 1840–1980* (Leiden, 2013); Isabelle de Solier, *Food and the Self: Consumption, Production and Material Culture* (London, 2013); Christina J. Hodge, *Consumerism and the Emergence of the Middle Class in Colonial America* (New York, 2014).

relied on references to objects in textual sources with a limited recourse to archaeological finds and surviving objects, the new historical status accorded food, housing, tools, and transport fueled the development of postclassical archaeology, numismatics, historic textiles, museums of technology, and other specialized fields devoted to the study of material artifacts.¹⁸ Second, the *Annales* movement contributed to more interdisciplinary work in history and, in particular, fostered borrowings from anthropology. Since the nineteenth century historians had engaged work in the emerging social sciences of economics and sociology—particularly the work of Karl Marx (1818–83), Max Weber (1864–1920), and Émile Durkheim (1858–1917)—but the “new social history” inspired by the *Annales* brought them into contact with the methods of anthropology through Claude Lévi-Strauss (1908–2009), Clifford Geertz (1926–2006), and Victor Turner (1920–83).¹⁹

All of these streams of development—within anthropology, art history, archaeology, and history—came together in the interdisciplinary climate of the 1970s and 1980s to produce the field of material culture studies. Object-focused work by Anglophone historians at first favored the descriptions “material history,” “material life,” or “material civilization.”²⁰ But the term derived from anthropology and already dominant in French and German—material culture (*culture matérielle*, *materiellen Kultur*)—came to rule in the 1990s, a decade that also witnessed the foundation of

18. See, for example, Christopher Gerrard, *Medieval Archaeology: Understanding Traditions and Contemporary Approaches* (London, 2003), pp. 128–32; *The Archaeology of Medieval Europe*, ed. James Graham-Campbell and Magdalena Valor, 2 vols. (Aarhus, 2008–11), 1:20–23; the *Bulletin de liaison du Centre international d'étude des textiles anciens* was founded in 1955 and dramatically increased in size and sophistication over the 1980s and into the 1990s.

19. The classic example, of course, is Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie, *Montaillou, village occitan de 1294 à 1324* (Paris, 1975); Howell and Prevenier, *From Reliable Sources*, pp. 89–99; Burguière, *L'École des Annales*, pp. 169–84, 231–35.

20. One translation of Braudel's *Civilisation, matérielle et capitalisme* by Miriam Kochan (New York, 1973) rendered the title *Capitalism and Material Life, 1400–1800*, and American historians have tended to prefer these terms: Robert Blair St. George, ed., *Material Life in America, 1600–1860* (Boston, 1988); J. Ritchie Garrison, *Landscape and Material Life in Franklin County, Massachusetts, 1770–1860* (Knoxville, 1991); Bernard L. Herman, *Town House: Architecture and Material Life in the Early American City, 1780–1830* (Chapel Hill, 2005). An early journal dedicated to the subject, founded in 1976 by the History Division of the Canadian Museum of Civilization and the National Museum of Science and Technology, illustrates the Anglophone preference in this period: its English title was *Material History Bulletin* and in French *Bulletin d'histoire de la culture matérielle* (continued by *Material History Review. Revue de la culture matérielle* from 1991).

the *Journal of Material Culture* (1996–) and self-conscious manifestos.²¹ Material culture had arrived.

Approaches, Strengths, and Weaknesses

Some of the dominant approaches to material culture are well illustrated in this issue. One is the object study or “biography” of an object, represented here by William B. Taylor’s and Liam Matthew Brockey’s essays.²² This approach starts with a single object and moves from basic questions to the exploration of the broader subjects of cultural ideas, values, and practices. The basic questions encourage detailed analysis. What is it? Who made it and for what purposes? What materials were used in making it, and why were these chosen rather than others? How and why has it come down to us? Did it change over time (that is, were things added to it or is there evidence of removals)? The single-source starting point particularly recommends this approach to students and teachers, and several guides to doing object biographies can be found online: an excellent example, produced by the National Museum of American History’s “The Object of History” project, is at <http://objectofhistory.org/guide>. Perhaps particularly useful for historians is an article in the American Historical Association’s *Perspectives* in its May/June 1991 issue in which Susan Stuard and several of her colleagues at Haverford College shared their “Artifact Assignment” in a required junior “Seminar on Evidence.”²³

Taylor’s contribution to this issue—on “An ‘Evolved’ Devotional Book from Late-Eighteenth-Century Mexico”—well illustrates the technique. Although many object biographies take unusual artifacts as their subjects, Taylor’s focus is a traditional historical source: a book. But his analysis attends to its physical, material characteristics. The scuffed leather and boards of its calfskin binding and repairs to its endpapers attest to its

21. Asa Berger, “Conclusion: The Ghost in the Machine,” in *Reading Matter: Multidisciplinary Perspectives on Material Culture* (New Brunswick, NJ, 1992), pp. 131–36; Henry Glassie, *Material Culture* (Bloomington, IN, 1999); Gerald L. Pocius, Introduction, in *Living in a Material World*, pp. xiii–xix.

22. Igor Kopytoff, “The Cultural Biography of Things: Commoditization as Process,” in *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*, ed. Arjun Appadurai (New York, 1986), pp. 64–94; Chris Gosden and Yvonne Marshall, “The Cultural Biography of Objects,” *World Archaeology*, 31 (1999), 169–78.

23. Margaret Schaus, John Spielman, and Susan Stuard, “Introducing Undergraduates to Manuscript Research,” *Perspectives on History*, May/June 1991, <http://www.historians.org/publications-and-directories/perspectives-on-history/may-1991/introducing-undergraduates-to-manuscript-research>.

use over time. Its small, pocket size suggests a devotional book meant to be carried easily and turned to in various settings. Most interestingly, things were added to it—written and pasted into it—offering the historian clues to who owned it and what their devotional practices and ideas were. From these specific pieces of evidence in this material object's evolution, Taylor moves outward to the histories of imported religious books and literacy, of lay devotional communities, and of Catholic reform movements in early-modern Spanish America. The material aspects of this book show how believers altered devices meant to reform their devotions by incorporating elements of precisely those religious practices ecclesiastical leaders were trying to vanquish.

A different example of this approach is provided by Brockey's essay on the relics of Francis Xavier in early-modern Asia.²⁴ The object in this case is the body of the sixteenth-century Jesuit missionary who preached the gospel in Mozambique, India, Indonesia, Japan, and China. Brockey traces, in the exquisite detail afforded by Jesuit correspondence, how the body did and did not change: what was done to it after death, the perceived evidence for its incorrupt state, and the pieces removed both through exuberant veneration and official mandate. The human uses of a human body are the focus as well as the ideas and beliefs informing those uses. We learn how Portuguese merchants brought it first from Schangchuan Island to Malacca, then on to Goa; how it was received by the residents of Goa, how the Jesuits conserved and exhibited it there; and how they preached and wrote about it. The meanings of this corporal object, in Brockey's analysis, turn out to be far more localized than the far-flung travels of the saint might suggest.

As Brockey's essay well illustrates, one strength of the object biography is the opportunities it provides for captivating historical narrative. It is often said that objects tell stories, and they certainly can furnish historians with material for innovative storytelling. Some of the stimulus is in describing complex artifacts, but more often it is the new perspective on written sources that the object affords. Both are evident in Richard L. Williams's cultural biography of a "subversive playing card." The object itself—a sixteenth-century three of hearts—had an unexpected image on its reverse: a Crucifixion group with the Blessed Virgin and St. John the Evangelist flanking Christ on the cross, painted simply and inexpertly

24. Still today an object of fascination and controversy: Steve Vickers, "All That Remains," *Washington Post*, August 17, 2014, F01.

using only a few colors: brown, green, red, and yellow. Why would a religious image be on the back of a playing card? The other oddity of the card was that its top had been cut to a rounded arch, which suggested a shape similar to images in home altar triptychs. Fascinated by the paper object and why it had been preserved, the historian looked to the archival sources with new questions. A letter from the lieutenant of the Tower of London, in fact, identified the object as evidence found in the possession of one of the Duke of Norfolk's men, Richard Lowther. According to the jailor, it showed "the lewdness of his religion." Williams traces Lowther's relationship with the Duke of Norfolk and his role in the Catholic plot in 1569 to depose Queen Elizabeth I and place her cousin Mary, Queen of Scots, on the throne. But he also takes us inside the homes and devotional lives of other Elizabethan Catholics to understand why a playing card—why, in particular, the three of hearts—would have been refashioned into an individual shrine. In the end, he tells a story about how religious imagery took on seditious meanings.²⁵

A variant of the object biography is to consider a type or genre of object. This sort of study can be limited to a specific corpus of examples, as in Katherine Haas's study of nineteenth-century American liturgical vestments. She defined a group of ninety-five vestments securely dated to the nineteenth century from eight institutions in Pennsylvania, Maryland, Indiana, and Washington, DC. To evaluate whether the patterns revealed in her sample of artifacts were valid, she compared them to those in sales catalogs of firms vending vestments in the United States.²⁶ In earlier periods where survivals are more limited, one can attempt more comprehensive analyses. To keep with the example of vestments, my own recent study of

25. Richard L. Williams, "Contesting the Everyday: The Cultural Biography of a Subversive Playing Card," in *Everyday Objects: Medieval and Early Modern Material Culture and Its Meanings*, ed. Tara Hamling and Catherine Richardson (Farnham, UK, 2010), pp. 241–56, here p. 242. Other examples of objects that have been studied in this fashion are Constantine's battle standard: Hallie G. Meredith, "Christianizing Constantine: Eusebius' *Vita Constantini* as a Late Antique Social Canvas," in *Objects in Motion: The Circulation of Religion and Sacred Objects in the Late Antique and Byzantine World*, ed. Hallie G. Meredith, [BAR International Series 2247], (Oxford, 2011), pp. 7–22; a carved Paiwan cross in Taiwan: Chang-Kwo Tan, "Syncretic Objects: Material Culture of Syncretism among Taiwan Catholics, Taiwan," *Journal of Material Culture*, 7 (2002), 167–89; the "touchdown Jesus" mural at Notre Dame University: Margaret M. Grubiak, "Visualizing the Modern Catholic University: The Original Intentions of 'Touchdown Jesus' at the University of Notre Dame," *Material Religion*, 6 (2010), 336–68.

26. Katherine Haas, "The Fabric of Religion: Vestments and Devotional Catholicism in Nineteenth-Century America," *Material Religion*, 3 (2007), 190–217, esp. 193, 213n1.

medieval liturgical attire, although not exhaustive, was able to encompass a large number of the surviving garments from throughout Europe before 1200 compared to all the images of vested clerics for the period in the Index of Christian Art and an array of written sources, particularly canon law.²⁷ Other recent examples of studies focused on a genre of objects are Cynthia Hahn's beautifully illustrated book on reliquaries from 400 to 1204, Crispin Paine's article on portable altars, Anne L. Clark's essay on the "Veronica," and Elín Luque Agraz's book on painted ex-votos of the Virgin of Soledad.²⁸

Caroline Bynum's contribution to this issue on nuns' crowns, moreover, shows how this approach can succeed with brilliant results in periods where both material and textual survivals are more abundant. Focusing on a type of object that is mentioned in texts and produced in different media, Bynum not only explicates the many meanings crowns had for religious women but also traces change in the forms of crowns across a critical period of reform. When forced by an Observant reforming delegation in 1469 to relinquish the removable gold crowns that adorned their statues of the Blessed Virgin, the nuns of Wienhausen had statues made whose crowns could not be removed. The difference in these surviving objects is crucial evidence. One might read the written accounts of this reform and conclude that the nuns accepted the reformers' correction of their devotions and stopped crowning their images of the Madonna. And inventories usually do not describe objects like statues with enough detail to capture this change. Only the objects themselves tell this story. By casting her evidentiary net broadly—considering material crowns, painted crowns, textual notices, and descriptions of crowns—Bynum demonstrates how deeply meaningful crowns and crowning were to late-medieval religious women and how reforms, even the Reformation, were tenaciously resisted and the cause of considerable spiritual anguish.

27. Maureen C. Miller, *Clothing the Clergy: Virtue and Power in Medieval Europe, c. 800–1200* (Ithaca, NY, 2014), pp. 5–8. My study of episcopal residences also sought a comprehensive view, but within more limited geographical bounds (northern Italy, from late antiquity through the thirteenth century): Maureen C. Miller, *The Bishop's Palace: Architecture and Authority in Medieval Italy* (Ithaca, NY, 2000), pp. 7–8, 261–76.

28. Cynthia Hahn, *Strange Beauty: Issues in the Making and Meaning of Reliquaries, 400–circa 1204* (University Park, PA, 2012); Crispin Paine, "The Portable Altar in Christian Tradition and Practice," in Meredith, ed., *Objects in Motion*, pp. 25–42; Anne L. Clark, "Venerating the Veronica: Varieties of Passion Piety in the Later Middle Ages," *Material Religion*, 3 (2007), 164–89; Elín Luque Agraz, *El arte de dar gracias: los exvotos pictóricos de la Virgen de la Soledad de Oaxaca* (Mexico, 2007).

As Bynum's study illustrates, an important advantage of focusing on a genre or type of artifact is that it offers greater scope for the analysis of change over time. It is not, of course, impossible to explore historical change in the biography of a single object. The "evolved" character of the object chosen by Taylor, for example, yields evidence related to broad changes in devotional practices in early-modern Mexico. One can also use known historical patterns of change over time to contextualize a single object. So a historian writing the biography of a reliquary bust could contextualize it within the broader patterns discerned by Hahn in *Strange Beauty*. But many studies focused on a single object illuminate only a single moment in time. As with "micro-history," the approach can be immensely rewarding and yield new insights into a particular historical period or event. But the field of material culture studies is also littered with underdeveloped object biographies that clearly began life as a conference paper and were published without sufficient deepening and revision: many lack the rich historical contextualization necessary to establish the significance of the object and of the author's observations about it. What I have found particularly stimulating about researching developments in an entire class of objects is that it allows comparison of changes over time in textual, visual, and material sources. Only looking at the material remains of episcopal residences, for example, revealed that documentary changes in their description did not necessarily mean a new or different structure and the gap between new language and a new building could be considerable. In looking at ecclesiastical garments, however, the documentary evidence of inventories accorded with the material evidence of surviving textiles in identifying a significant stylistic change in the late-eighth/early-ninth century, whereas visual representations of clerics wearing such garb lag by a half-century to more than two centuries.²⁹ Such discrepancies can be quite historically significant.

Colleen McDannell's essay on "Photography, Teenie Harris, and the Migration of Catholic Images" reveals still other rewarding approaches to material culture as well as exciting research and pedagogical opportunities for the modern and contemporary history of Catholicism. She focuses her study on a collection of sources—the photographs of the twentieth-century African American photojournalist, Teenie Harris—and analyzes its evidence of the kinds of objects depicted, who was shown with them, and the ways in which people placed and used objects. This is an approach that can

29. Miller, *The Bishop's Palace*, pp. 89–97; Miller, *Clothing the Clergy*, pp. 96–97, 108–09, 115, 120–21, 130–37.

be used with many kinds of collections. One could analyze, for example, the content of a diocesan museum's collection. What kinds of Catholic artifacts does it contain? Whose objects (individuals or institutions) were they, and how did they find their way to the museum? What beliefs and practices do they attest? Whose objects are not represented and why? Collections of texts can also reveal the material. How do objects figure in a given collection of letters, of court records, of short stories? McDannell here mines photographic collections, but her techniques could be applied to collections of woodblock prints, manuscript illuminations, or paintings.

It is worth noting at this point that although the study of material culture prioritizes research on material artifacts—the most primary of sources in this field—it is also enriched through analyses of *representations*, textual and visual, of materiality. Literary specialists within the interdisciplinary field of material culture studies take this as their primary focus, and some intellectual and cultural historians do, too. For most historians, however, as for McDannell here, the instinct is to move from representation—African Americans pictured with crucifixes—to what can be known from other historical sources about African American Catholics in Pittsburgh, about the parish of St. Benedict the Moor, and about other evidence for how crucifixes were used. Particularly for students, McDannell's essay is valuable for demonstrating how one moves from something odd or surprising in a source to a set of historical questions and issues that are fertile ground for further research.

The article also ventures into the rapidly developing field of new media. Although the Teenie Harris photography collection exists as a physical body of sources in the Carnegie Museum of Art, it also now exists virtually online as a searchable collection of digitized images. As McDannell points out, libraries, archives, state historical societies, and government agencies are rapidly digitizing their photographic archives and making them freely available on the Internet. Although her essay reveals the limitations of some of the cataloguing identifications, the record information digitized with each photograph makes it possible to search systematically for objects, individuals, and places. In addition to facilitating access to photographic archives, the digital revolution has also fostered research in material culture through online, searchable museum catalogues. A leader in this regard is the Victoria and Albert Museum in London, whose collection of more than a million objects can be searched via the Internet by collection, material, type, provenance, and date. Enter, for example, “monstrance,” and within seconds you have forty-one examples from the fourteenth to the nineteenth century that can be further sorted by material

(gold, silver, silver-gilt), technique (casting, embossing, gilding), and provenance (mostly Spanish and German). Pictures are available online for close to half of the records, and most include extensive historical notes with acquisition information and bibliography. Most major collections, particularly in the United States, are putting their catalogs online and contain thousands of material objects related to Catholic belief and practice. Hopefully, diocesan museums will follow this trend.

Two strengths of material approaches to religion are also evident in McDannell's article. First is the evidence she presents for the "migration" of objects: how material items created in one faith tradition can be picked up and used in different religious settings by people with quite different beliefs. This mobility of the object allows appropriation and reinterpretation of religious artifacts, but it also enables the historian to trace and evaluate religious influence. Although historians are accustomed to charting the intellectual heritage of Catholicism, material culture offers important tools in understanding its devotional impact. The mobility of objects also underscores that the boundaries between different Christian churches or communities are more fluid than sometimes conceived or depicted. Conversion is not the only response to contact with a faith tradition.

A second, and related, strength evident in McDannell's essay is the light material culture can shed on underrepresented actors in Catholic history. Harris's photos invite us to consider a minority population, not only in American society but also within the American Catholic Church. The image of a crucifix in an African American home prompts the historian to wonder what percentage of American Catholics was black and what their experience was. The emergence of material culture studies, as I've suggested above, was related to the *Annalistes'* advocacy for an inclusive approach to the past, of which the recovery of nonelite religious experiences, practices, and beliefs was a vibrant part. My own turn to material culture, in fact, was motivated by interest in the secular clergy, but particularly the average parish priest in medieval Europe. Architecture did not get me too far down the social spectrum. There turned out to be very little documentary, and even less physical, evidence of the living quarters of clerics below the level of cathedral canons and bishops. But vestments took me a lot further into the culture of average clerics, even that of the minor orders, and even revealed clerical devotional practices not mentioned in any written sources. The most intriguing material evidence was of "reliquary" vestments—that is, liturgical garments believed to belong to a holy cleric that were worn in his memory by fellow clerics and, as the garments disintegrated, either repaired to keep them wearable or the fragments were

imbedded within new vestments.³⁰ Textile conservators were well aware of this phenomenon, but as a historian I had never encountered references to it in documents or studies.

Just as it partakes of the virtues of history in the *Annales* tradition, so, too, work in material culture exhibits its vices. It can move beyond recuperating under-represented populations to overemphasizing the fringes. Do we need a history of “paint by numbers” versions of da Vinci’s *Last Supper*?³¹ Probably not. Like some studies of “popular religion”—recall Jean-Claude Schmitt’s *Holy Greyhound* about a dog “saint” in medieval France³²—material culture has sometimes gravitated toward the margins. This is in part due to the importance of consumerism and consumption as themes within material culture studies.³³ This emphasis when applied to religion tends to foreground kitsch at the expense of mainstream devotional artifacts.

One could also accuse material culture studies of reinforcing the prominence of well-established fields. To a certain degree, contextualizing objects requires a developed historiography: the material remains of a monastery can more easily be your focus if there are already some published histories of the community, its benefactors, its patrimony, and its relations with ecclesiastical and political authorities. In compiling the introductory bibliography for this issue, I have attempted to provide an array of works across chronological and geographical fields, but the relatively balanced appearance of this selection does not represent the distribution of work thus far accomplished by historians on Catholic material culture. That work is much more abundant for Europe and North America, and within Europe more developed in the medieval and early-modern fields. A strong body of scholarship is emerging for Latin America, but thus far Asia and Africa have not received their due. More fundamental empirical research on the history of the Church in Ghana, Kenya, Korea, or Vietnam, for example, is surely needed before the material culture of these Catholic communities can be fruitfully explored. Still, material sources can con-

30. Miller, *Clothing the Clergy*, pp. 162–68.

31. Thomas Ryan and Lawrence Rubin, “By the Numbers: Material Spirituality and the Last Supper,” *Spiritus: A Journal of Christian Spirituality*, 2 (2002), 147–62.

32. Jean-Claude Schmitt, *Le saint lévrier: Guinefort, guérisseur d’enfants depuis le XIII^e siècle* (Paris, 1979); English ed., *The Holy Greyhound: Guinefort, Healer of Children since the Thirteenth Century*, trans. Martin Thom (New York, 1983).

33. Kristin Schwain, “Visual Culture and American Religions,” *Religion Compass*, 4, no. 3 (2010), 190–201.

tribute to the global history of Catholicism as some pioneering studies have demonstrated.³⁴

This special centennial celebration issue of *The Catholic Historical Review* cannot provide an exhaustive survey of the methods and practice of material culture studies. But it does offer an introduction to the field, four stimulating examples of its value as an approach to Catholic history, and points of entry for those interested in expanding both their own historical horizons and the purview of Catholic studies. The rich and varied material culture of Catholicism constitutes a valuable historical patrimony. It merits exploration in both teaching and writing the history of the Church.

34. Cécile Fromont, "Collecting and Translating Knowledge Across Cultures: Capuchin Missionary Images of Early Modern Central Africa, 1650–1750," in *Collecting Across Cultures: Material Exchanges in the Early Modern Atlantic World*, ed. Daniela Bleichmar and Peter C. Mancall (Philadelphia, 2011), pp. 134–54; Wakakuwa Midori, "Iconography of the Virgin Mary in Japan and Its Transformation: Chinese Buddhist Sculpture and *Maria Kannon*," in *Christianity and Cultures: Japan & China in Comparison 1543–1644*, ed. M. Antoni J. Üçerler, S.J., [Bibliotheca Instituti Historici S. I. 68], (Rome, 2009), pp 228–48.