

Findings: The Material Culture of Needlework and Sewing. MARY C. BEAUDRY. 2006. Yale University Press, New Haven, xi + 237 pp. \$55.00 (cloth), ISBN-13 978-0-300-11093-7.

Reviewed by Jamie C. Brandon, Arkansas Archeological Survey and Southern Arkansas University.

Although the title of this book may suggest to some readers a book of rather narrow focus and limited utility, *Findings: The Material Culture of Needlework and Sewing* is a work that is both comprehensive and particular, both practical and theoretical, and it is above all else potentially useful. First and foremost, this volume will definitely be helpful for those who wish to interpret the many sewing-related artifacts recovered from historic-period archaeological sites (and most historical sites yield at least some of these items). Mary Beaudry quite rightly points out that small finds, such as sewing-related materials, have the potential to yield much information about the people who once lived and worked on these sites. They can reveal as much (if not more) as the ceramics, glass, clay pipes, and animal bones that have been traditionally the major focus of archaeological analysis. The reason for the importance of small finds is simple—they are often very personal items. As such they have profound implications for the construction of both personal and social identities. In the case of small finds relating to needlework and sewing (objects often uncritically associated with femininity), Beaudry sees the opportunity to examine gender construction and social rank in addition to personal identity. In *Findings* she sets out to “construct a rich contextual analysis of how women and men used objects of needlework and sewing and to consider the multiplicity of meanings these everyday objects conveyed” (p. 7).

Findings is, however, just as useful for a second purpose. This volume serves as a model for other archaeologists who need (desperately) to write more guides to historical material culture. In her discussions of pins, needles, thimbles, and the like, Beaudry gives us important terminology (e.g., *knurling* refers to the machine-applied indentations on a thimble), diagnostic information (e.g., how to tell scissors from shears), and chronological information. But more importantly, *Findings* also explores the range of interpretive possibilities of these objects with the understanding that the meaning of material culture varies with context. This is a rare attribute among guides to material culture.

Moreover, this work succeeds in providing an impressive amount of cultural information for these items—in effect creating an interpretive context in which archaeologists can place their own sewing-related finds. After a brief introduction to her subject

I found two chapters particularly valuable in placing their approaches within the context of theory and practice. Felipe Gaitán Ammann animates the lives of the late nineteenth-century upper class of Bogotá through the medium of a single French-made bone toothbrush, mistakenly placed in a bone bag during excavations. He provides a useful theoretical review that contrasts ethnographic and archaeological approaches to “object biography.” Ethnographers tend to focus on certain singular objects in terms of inalienable qualities that link them to their possessors, whereas archaeologists should be concerned with the material characteristics of any object, even commodities, whose inherent attributes can transcend their identifications with persons and whose performative possibilities should be investigated. Marisa Lazzari is concerned with the distribution of obsidian artifacts in northwest Argentina in the first millennium A.D. In a lucid literature review she argues for a phenomenological, intersubjective perspective as opposed to the dominant textual and functional approaches to interpreting the regional exchange of exotic materials among formative societies. Her goal is to understand how the circulation of obsidian artifacts was a means of connecting people to places and others not visible, and thereby of enlarging the sense of space-time beyond one’s experiences. The objects assume agentive qualities in effecting the co-constitutions of peoples and their worlds through their inherent characteristics and their movement in space and time.

In a brief afterword Daniel Miller draws out common themes, not all of which are explicitly articulated in the different chapters. He opens with the unremarkable fact—which nevertheless bears repeating—that good archaeologists seek to transcend the limitations of the material remains they encounter in order to understand social and cultural lives that are now invisible and at the time were dependent on some greater reality conceived as immaterial. At the same time, archaeologists want to investigate what was actualized or materialized out of multiple potential possibilities, which means that they must not overlook the objects themselves. Miller notes that making sense of the dialectical relationship of the abstract and real, the material and the intangible, is an objective of contemporary archaeologists but it was also a means of sense-making for the peoples of the past. Thus, he says, the aims of archaeologists are analogous with theirs. Even readers less interested in this specific approach to materiality will find value in the various reflections on the subject and practice of archaeology in this volume.

culture. As Meskell explains in her introduction, this approach is quite different from the conventional study of material culture in archaeology focused on form, material, and manufacture, while not ignoring any of these factors. This perspective also transcends functionalist and symbolic forms of inquiry that have treated objects as epiphenomenal, as reflections, representations, or results of something else that is intangible. Materiality can center archaeological attention more firmly on the material world and its associated actions, a “material habitus” that enmeshes persons, objects, and spaces in the dynamic interplay of immaterialization and objectification.

Although Meskell provides a short introduction to the volume’s contents and goals, readers new to the subject and desirous of a more thorough theoretical review would be better served by such recent books as Meskell’s *Object Worlds in Ancient Egypt: Material Biographies Past and Present* and Daniel Miller’s introduction to a book he edited, *Materiality*. This volume’s conscious purpose is to pursue diverse approaches to materiality, exploring its potential in suggestive and innovative ways that should widen archaeological horizons concerning its subject. In eight chapters contributors build bridges with other literatures and approaches beyond the usual archaeological repertory, including sensuality, bodily practices, fetishism, technology, and consumption, identity politics, representation, and discourse. Several authors played off the various meanings of “material” and “immaterial,” showing how materiality is a starting point for thinking about a variety of topics rather than a well-bounded phenomenon. Contributors also grappled with ancient and modern contexts of materiality, attempting to investigate the situatedness of materiality in the past alongside present-day actions and the meaningfulness of objects (of the past and present) in the present. Some of them noted that elucidating dynamic, recursive relationships between people and objects, especially over long time frames, is difficult to do.

The spatial coverage is global and the scale ranges from entire landscapes to museum exhibitions, from artifact assemblages to a single artifact. Immateriality is also highlighted in chapters on ancient Neo-Assyrian magical acts and turn-of-the-century urban electrification. Historical and ethnographically generated texts play a large role in many interpretations, which may diminish the immediate appeal of the volume to archaeologists seeking explicit guidance for applying these perspectives to the text-free past. A minor but annoying shortcoming was the absence of any information on the chapter authors beyond their names.

Some readers may be stymied by the density of language and the assumption of prior knowledge of the multiple literatures referenced by the different authors.

One of the most notable aspects of the book is its extensive box features. Each chapter contains several, typically one box considering a specific type of artifact or feature and a second box considering a current issue or problem. There are also several box features that provide biographical information on notable archaeologists. Each chapter ends with a case study written by an expert. These case studies are relatively long (typically 6 to 10 pages) and detailed, and they add substantially to the book by providing tangible examples of how our knowledge of the past is created. Additional box features and case studies are included on the bundled CD-ROM.

Each chapter also contains a brief list of suggested readings while the book’s complete bibliography is contained on the bundled CD-ROM and is not included in the printed text. This was a mistake on the part of the managing editor. While the book is not heavily referenced, the reader should not have to go to the CD to find bibliographical citations. Each chapter includes a summary, and the case studies each end with a series of discussion questions. There are additional study questions and a self-quiz for each chapter on the bundled CD-ROM. The book includes an extensive glossary and a relatively brief index. The book as a whole is nicely produced, with clear black and white photos, plentiful maps and figures, and good marginal white space for notes in the main text.

In the end, there is one key question to ask about any textbook: Would I use this in my class? My answer is yes, I would consider adopting it for next year. It provides good coverage of the archaeological record of North America, there is plenty of additional material for students to read, and the maps and illustrations are excellent. Anyone teaching North American archaeology will want to take a serious look at *Seeking Our Past*.

Archaeologies of Materiality. LYNN MESKELL, editor. 2005. Blackwell, Malden, MA. ix + 229 pp. \$38.95 (paper). ISBN-13 978-1-4051-3616-7.

Reviewed by Susan D. Gillespie, University of Florida.

This book results from a School of American Research symposium on materiality in archaeology whose purpose was to draw greater attention to archaeological contexts within the growing interdisciplinary field of material culture studies. The plural form of the word in the book title is apt. Archaeology is treated in a very broad sense of materiality and is not limited to excavated artifacts or to studies of past lives. The contributors provide contextual studies of objects and assemblages in terms of the social engagements they entailed as well as the mutual construction of selves and