

***The Global Lives of Things:  
The Material Culture of Connections  
in the Early Modern World***

Anne Gerritsen and Giorgio Riello eds  
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*The Global Lives of Things* is a collection written by scholars who work at the intersection of the history of material culture and consumption on the one hand, and global history on the other. The collection is one outcome of the events organized by the ‘Global Commodities’ International Network funded by Britain’s Arts and Humanities Research Council, and coordinated by the Global History and Culture Centre at the University of Warwick, with the collaboration of the Victoria and Albert Museum, the Peabody Essex Museum in Salem (Massachusetts), and the Bilgi University (Istanbul), between 2011 and 2013. The volume ‘explores the ways in which objects—be they traded commodities, gifts, rarities, artworks or everyday mundane artefacts—came to shape the lives of people across the globe and at the same time created new and sometimes unpredictable connections’ (xi). This implies understanding the meanings of objects, which depend on their ‘social life,’ according to Arjun Appadurai (*The Social Life of Things*, 1986).

During the 1980s, material culture and consumption were increasingly addressed by historians; for instance by Neil McKendrick, J. H. Plumb, and John Brewer, but also, and earlier, by Fernand Braudel. (Surprisingly, Braudel is not mentioned in *The Global Lives of Things*). Yet the publication of Appadurai’s edited volume *The Social Life of Things* in 1986 helped to boost attention toward ‘things,’ and particularly toward the ‘biographies’ of things. According to Anne Gerritsen and Giorgio Riello, around the mid-1990s the scholarly landscape changed again, as a consequence of the ‘global turn,’ and now ‘cross-border connections and interactions take precedence over the boundaries and narratives that seek to suggest the importance of separate nations’ (2). While I agree with historians who stress the existence of earlier influential studies addressing global history, I also agree that, in the last two decades or so, attention to the ‘global’ and to ‘globalization’ has been booming.

In any case, importantly, *The Global Lives of Things* is the outcome of a fruitful intermingling of global history and the history of material culture and consumption. At stake is understanding the plural meanings of things, linked to their trajectories. To make sense of the world of goods by viewing objects as ‘commodities that have been

moved from A to B is not enough.’ As Gerritsen and Riello explain, ‘we need to identify the “things” as global things and trace their trajectories, so that we see the accumulation of meanings that objects acquire as they travel.’ Such travels imply longer or shorter displacements in space over longer or shorter spans of time, often associated with manipulations, changes, reutilization for different purposes. On the other hand, the contributors to this volume ‘are not only interested in trajectories that span time zones and geographical variations:’ they are also ‘concerned to explore the transformative impact of these trajectories on the goods themselves’ (13).

As Paula Findlen notes in one of three Afterwords to the volume (the other two are by Suraiya Faroqhi and Maxine Berg), *The Global Lives of Things* offers a number of ‘material microhistories’ (244). These illustrate itineraries that raise the question: ‘how exactly do things become global?’ Illuminating the implications of such transformation, the essays contribute to answering this question. In fact this collection ‘considers how, in the early modern period, the social lives of things were global’—that is, they ‘transcended the cultural and political boundaries of nations and even continents’ (23). It does so by focusing on examples taken from ‘the small but crucial portion of material culture that contributed to the creation of long-distance social and economic connections’ (23).

The first part is devoted to ‘Objects of global knowledge.’ Pamela H. Smith explains that

in the production of things, and, more generally, in all human acts of making, materials—which possess particular properties that enable a certain range of manipulations by the human hand—undergo a series of transformations, first into the ‘raw materials’ of human use by means of specialized practices and technologies, then into objects and things, and, finally (or, rather, concurrently), humans assign meanings to these things by integrating them into systems of knowledge and belief (or, ‘theories’) (31).

Smith focuses on a telling example, the production of vermilion (a red pigment used by artists to imitate blood) from sulphur and mercury. She illustrates the related flows of matter, practices, people, and knowledge across Eurasia.

Christine Guth’s chapter is concerned with shagreen (leather made from shark and rayskin) and the network of knowledge that contributed to making the particular features of this product desirable at a global level: ‘it satisfied the need for a material that was easily graspable and waterproof, but also had visual appeal.’ Although used since antiquity, in early modern times shagreen was employed ‘in a new range of goods including weapons, scientific instruments, lacquered chests, luggage, eyeglass and watch cases, and other personal accessories’ (62). Shark and rayskin began to be traded across the Atlantic, Indian, and Pacific Oceans. Japan was a major importer and

producer of luxury goods made with these materials, and, according to Guth, was a ‘catalyst for their fashionable new applications in Europe’ (62).

While many studies trace the flow of exotic goods to Europe, in this volume Pippa Lacey shows that in the eighteenth-century Mediterranean red coral was traded to Asia and the Qing imperial court (1644-1911). Thanks to the records of the English East India Company, Lacey focuses on the ‘coral network’ that linked Italian fishermen of coral, London diamond merchants, English naval captains, Chinese officials, as well as Guandong craftsmen and their Manchu rulers, the Qing emperors. This chapter shows that ‘each link in the coral network combined to effect the transformation of red coral from natural raw material to precious imperial treasure’ (81).

In the second part of *The Global Lives of Things* (titled ‘Objects of global connections’), Mariana Françaço investigates the uses and meanings of feathered ornaments in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, beginning with Louise Hollandine’s surprising portrait of Princess Sophie of the Palatinate wearing a cape made of red and yellow feathers and a red-feathered headdress (in the collection of the Wasserburg-Anholt Castle, Isselburg, undated). After describing the production and ritual uses of feathered ornaments by Indigenous tribes, especially the Tupi people from the coastal area of Brazil, Françaço shows that after 1492 feathers quickly entered networks of material exchange, becoming the prized possessions of European collectors, and featuring in their *kunstkammern* as featherwork, loose sets of feathers, or entire birds. Featherwork thus exemplifies ‘the transformation and reinvention of indigenous material culture in the colonial context’ (107).

The connections of Portugal with Brazil and the Portuguese empire at large are the topic of Nuno Senos’s chapter. The basis for this study is the extraordinary inventory—a list of over 6,000 entries—of the Vila Viçosa palace of Teodósio I, Duke of Bragança (d. 1563), who belonged to the wealthiest and most powerful family among the Portuguese nobility. Senos investigates those entries that reflect the duke’s interest and involvement in maritime voyages that had been led by the Portuguese from the early fifteenth century onwards, to establish strongholds and cities in Morocco, the Gulf of Guinea, Mozambique, the West coast of India, Malacca, China, Japan, and Brazil, and to develop transcontinental trade in a multitude of commodities. Significantly, the duke’s palace was filled with products from all over the world: according to Senos, this uncovered ‘their integration in a general sense of normality’ rather than a ‘fascination for the exotic’ (140).

The following chapter takes readers to Australia: Susan Broomhall investigates the encounters that took place, from the seventeenth-century onwards, between members of the Dutch East India Company (VOC) and Aboriginal peoples. This study explores how European objects (from trinkets and toys to precious metal and textiles) ‘have been crucial to, and embedded in, power relations, expressed in social and

emotional forms and practices, between Europeans and indigenous peoples in what is now Australia' (145-46). These objects have been agents of colonial and power relations; those that have survived to the present day challenge the common narrative according to which 'Australia was settled by the British at Port Jackson in 1788' (156), and contribute to perpetuating the exclusion of Aboriginal peoples 'from access, rights and emotional connections to their own lands' (157).

The encounters around the material objects analyzed by Kévin Le Doudic in his chapter about French and Indian consumers in eighteenth-century Pondicherry (India), show a different landscape. The city—the main trading post of the French East India Company in the Indian Ocean during the eighteenth century—was a commercial hub where merchandise from India, Europe, and the so-called Far East circulated, and inhabitants and travelers from different lands met. Le Doudic focuses on three types of encounters that shaped material life in the city: 'unavoidable encounters' occasioned by the need of the French to adapt to the environment; 'commercial encounters,' the main reason for the French presence; 'cultural encounters,' 'one expression of which can be traced in material goods' (163). Interestingly, for instance,

in terms of clothing and luxury accessories, Indians owned products of all origins in contrast to the French who excluded Asian products. This was due to the fact that some Indians sought to identify with the Westerners inhabiting the trading post with whom they were in contact for commercial purposes.

For the French, 'clothing was essential to social distinction and identification with the norms and values of French society. It was impossible to dress in Indian style' (176).

In the third part of the book, titled 'Objects of global consumption,' Matthew P. Romaniello discusses tobacco habits in the Russian empire during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The czars banned tobacco imports from the 1620s to the end of the century, when Peter the Great legalized imports, and trade flourished. However, when the ban was in place, tobacco was smuggled into European Russia and imported to Siberia, where it could be legally traded outside town walls, becoming part of Siberian commerce with Bukhara, India, Iran, and China. By the eighteenth century, Russia relied upon tobacco to facilitate the Siberian fur trade, and smoking spread among the populations of the Kamchatka peninsula. Those who belonged to the court of Peter the Great enjoyed smoking pipes; the eighteenth-century Russian elite preferred snuff, and western Siberian populations used water-pipes. The study of tobacco in Russia thus reveals social peculiarities and localized consumption habits pertaining to different ethno-linguistic groups that reinforced regional variations; patterns of consumption cannot be said to have unified the empire with a common habit, rather the contrary (195).

Sugar is often associated with tobacco in studies devoted to colonial consumer goods and global commodities. Yet Urmi Engineer approaches the history of sugar by focusing on the ecological changes caused by the transition to large-scale plantations that relied on African slaves. Environmental historians have mainly focused on deforestation, soil depletion, and erosion. Engineer aims to highlight changes in disease ecology: deforestation, irrigation, canal building, and so forth, as well as the development of port cities all created environments ‘particularly hospitable to West African diseases, especially yellow fever and malaria’ (199). Her approach thus contributes to illuminate ‘the ways in which non-human agents can shape human history’ (198).

Christine Fertig and Ulrich Pfister’s chapter on global material culture in eighteenth-century Hamburg shows that Germany’s overseas imports consisted mainly of colonial goods. Particularly spectacular was the growth in the market for coffee (despite stagnant per capita incomes), in connection with industrial development: textile workers appreciated coffee because it favored concentration on work during the long hours they had to spend sitting at the loom; moreover, women were numerous among such workers and had little time to cook. Other goods whose trade expanded rapidly, thanks to the increasing appreciation of body-care in the age of Enlightenment, were those ‘contributing to bodily well-being through their dietetic and medical application,’ such as cinchona bark, jalapa, and asafoetida. However, imported substances underwent ‘glocalizing’ processes: they were disentangled from the ritual, medical, and dietetic practices associated with them in non-European societies, and reconfigured for use in Europe.

Numerous images, both paintings and photographs, make visible to readers several ‘things’ that are the subject of this edited volume. Unfortunately, in the hard copy and in the e-book, all images are reproduced in black and white. Of course searches on the Internet can allow interested readers to view some of the images in all their colors which, in some cases, are crucial to appreciating their meaning. This is the case, for instance, with the oil painting by Antonio de Pereda known as *Still Life with an Ebony Chest* (State Hermitage Collection, St Petersburg, 1652); a refined analysis of this picture opens the book.

The extremely rich variety of objects, goods, habits, and themes dealt with in *The Global Lives of Things* may give the impression of a somewhat fragmented and dazing itinerary. However, within a scholarly landscape where both global history and the history of material culture and consumption have become a kind of fashion with a booming production of sometimes repetitive books and articles, this collection certainly does not bore the reader, thanks to its variegated contents. Indeed, it succeeds in communicating the complex, conflictual, chaotic but also coherent growth of connections and exchanges around the world. It also succeeds in illustrating the production of knowledge linked to the trajectories of those objects that became global:

RAFFAELLA SARTI

such objects, brought from one place to the other, were given new significances, and this resulted into a plurality and accumulation of meanings variable according to place and times.