



Material Culture :

Henry Glassie, Henry Glassie

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History and art connect in the study of material culture. Material culture records human intrusion in the environment. It is the way we imagine a distinction between nature and culture, and then rebuild nature to our desire, shaping, reshaping, and arranging things during life. We live in material culture, depend upon it, take it for granted, and realise through it our grandest aspirations. Thirty years ago, it seemed that material culture would become the realm within which relativistic and existential thinking would be extended to history and art, the issues of human significance and human excellence. Then the gears locked, the machine stopped, and began to run in reverse. We slid backward, rediscovering the energies of early modernism and naming our effort - in obeisance to the ideology of progress - postmodern. Humanist busied themselves with the reinvention of ideas they could have learned from the old masters of anthropology. Social scientists struggled to contrive ideas they could have learned by reading the great literature of the past. This retrograde motion was caused by more than adjustment to the conservative mood of the age. Moving ahead on independent disciplinary tracks, we had lost touch with one another. "What has changed can change again; the moment at which I write will pass. Groping over old territory, relocating the critical purpose of scholarly endeavour, rediscovering subjectivity and situation, the diversity of orders and the interconnectedness of things, we will find points of convergence that will become the basis for a new transdisciplinary practice, at once humanistic and scientific. Renewed in oneness, we will be able to get on with our work, fashioning a view of humanity fit to the needs of the world's people. "The concept of culture seems a secure achievement. In the future, history and art, as well as science and philosophy, will be understood to be, like culture, the creations of people who are alike in humanity, but different in tradition and predicament. Problematizing is easy and endless. New ideas are a dime a dozen. What matters is how ideas fare in the world, what they yield in hard application. Our work will recognise the reality of the individual. It will come to judgement contextually, acknowledging the distinctiveness of traditions that unfold only within human control and among uncontrollable circumstances. It will expand through cross-cultural comparisons that bring us understanding at once of the universal and the particular." - Henry Glassie, from the "Onward".

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Frances Savage:

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