



**Review of Peter N. Miller, History and Its Objects:  
Antiquarianism and Material Culture since 1500. Ithaca, NY:  
Cornell University Press, 2017**

José Beltrán

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Peter N. Miller, *History and Its Objects: Antiquarianism and Material Culture since 1500*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2017. Pp. xii, 300, 16 b/w illustrations. US\$39.95 (cloth).

Twenty-five years ago, Francis Haskell's *History and Its Images* taught us that, far from a new enterprise, scholars' attempts to reach the past through visual materials had a long, often tortuous history. Like Haskell's, Peter N. Miller's book is a much-expected child of its time. "Material culture" is nowadays a pervasive object of historical study, initially brought to the fore by economic historians of the 1980s and 1990s in the wake of Fernand Braudel's attention to the "*civilisation matérielle*." Since then, historians have been thinking hard about how the men and women of the past related to the artefacts of which their cultural environments were made. More importantly, there have been strenuous efforts to get the discipline out of its long-lived word-centered tendencies: historians of the book, of art, and of science in particular have engineered, in the last two or three decades at least, sophisticated ways to approach artefacts as historical sources. With the rising tide of heritage in our current "regime of historicity," research and curatorship are increasingly enmeshed forms of historical expertise and "materiality" has become very much one of today's methodological catchwords in the field.

Yet using objects as a way back into the past, Miller tells us, is neither new nor has it ever been the monopoly of university-based historians. Dense, elegantly written, and, at times, touchingly personal, *History and Its Objects* is several things at the same time. It is, first and foremost, a wonderful, deeply erudite intellectual approach to the use of artefacts as material evidence for studying the past. In line with one of Arnaldo Momigliano's greatest essays (which is the spark for Miller's study, as it was for Haskell's), the author does justice to the long maligned antiquarian tradition: rather than seeing in it an extinct branch in the evolutionary tree of modern historiography, Miller sets out to seek the missing link between artefact-loving antiquarians and the ancestors of today's "verbocentric" historians. But this readable monograph also provides a convincing, impassionate case for historiography and self-reflexivity in the writing of history: the introduction bears the telling title "Why Historiography Matters?" and the conclusion insists on historical research as being a "form of philosophical exercise . . . a way of being in the world" (209). It is also a plea for the affective dimension of our craft: much about the way we have done history with objects has to do with the emotional force of old remains. It offers, moreover, a glimpse at the history of cultural history before "the Burkhardt supernova" of 1860 (195).

Miller, however, does not mean to offer a comprehensive survey, as one might think at first. Chapter 1 shows that professional historians were latecomers in twentieth-century debates about historical material culture, while writers like Rainer Maria Rilke, artists like Giorgio de Chirico, and philosophers like Walter Benjamin thought long and hard about the past through things. Chapter 2 moves backwards to the maverick Saxon Karl Lamprecht and the largely forgotten "material turn" his work spurred around the last decades of the nineteenth century. Chapter 3 delves into sketching the gripping story of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century antiquarianism that the author knows so well: from Peiresc, on whose work Miller is perhaps the leading historian today, to Leibniz passing through Jean Mabillon and Jacob Spon. The bulk of the book, however, (i.e. chapters 4 to 8) focusses attention on one very specific place and time: the German lands in the period roughly between the mid-eighteenth century and the mid-nineteenth century. Chapters 4 and 5 look into Göttingen

during the second half of the eighteenth century, where the freshly founded university witnessed groundbreaking attempts to place material evidence at the center of historical pedagogy and research. There and then came into being the first academic curriculum for material culture studies from the hand of Johann Christoph Gatterer and his program on history's *Hilfswissenschaften* or auxiliary sciences, but also August Ludwig Schlözer's *Statistik*, a field conceived as a "vision of social life articulated through the material realities of daily life" (89). There and then, too, archeology became a university-grounded discipline, thanks among others to Christian Gottlob Heyne and his *Archäologie der Kunst* and to August Boeckh and his attempt to embrace antiquity as a whole, thought texts and artefacts alike. Chapter 6 moves away from universities and towards the amateur regional historical associations that mushroomed in nineteenth-century Germany, with their emphasis on the role of artefacts to study the lives of people in the past. The two last chapters concentrate on two different ways in which the study of material culture was presented as cultural history. Chapter 7 centers on Gustav Klemm, curator of the porcelain collection in Dresden and fervent collector himself, and his antiquarian and anthropological approach to history. Chapter 8 turns attention to Hans von und zu Aufseß and his creation of 1852, the *Germanisches Nationalmuseum* in Nuremberg. The ultimate collapse of Aufseß's original project marked several failures: that of the associations' movement, that of the museum as a research institution, that of cultural history as a university-based approach, that of the antiquarian tradition in the writing of history.

*History and Its Objects* is something of a mosaic made out of selective but highly relevant tiles. Most of them cohere in the avowedly intellectual approach of the author, which often leaves the reader wondering, however, about the actual place that artefacts have occupied in historical practice over time. Objects seem sometimes to fade from Miller's account of the methodological debates about them. Still, Miller has a contagious passion for how people wrote history before us. He invites us to write histories of scholarship that go beyond our own university-based ancestors and beyond our own conceived rifts between the space of the library and that of the museum. More importantly, by revealing the fragility of past attempts to approach history through objects, this book offers solid, much-needed foundations for furthering our own current debates about how a discipline so deeply rooted in the analysis of textual materials can make old artefacts speak and effectively turn them into historical sources.

José Beltrán  
École normale supérieure