



Object Lessons:

Thinking About Material Culture

In addition to movies, magazines, websites, and other forms of visual culture, we also experience countless material forms—such as beds, breakfasts, cars, clothing, sidewalks, and doorknobs. Because we experience these material forms every day, the ways in which they convey ideas and influence our movements and lives does not usually register in our consciousness and often goes without notice (Graves-Brown, 2000a). How might we think about all of these objects and environments that surround us? This article describes why art educators might consider studying material forms from everyday life, presents suggestions for exploring them in an art classroom, and includes an example to illustrate teaching about an object of material culture.

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Why Study Material Culture?

A *material culture* orientation includes the study of visual culture, yet calls for a broader view—to encompass the study of other kinds of human-made forms in addition to those that are primarily perceived as visual (Blandy & Bolin, 2003). Much attention has been paid to mass media, yet we often remain oblivious to the effects of human-designed objects, which “Far from being a neutral, inoffensive artistic activity, design, by its very nature... can cast ideas about who we are and how we should behave in permanent tangible forms” (Forty, 1986 p. 6).

Material culture includes all past and present human-made and human-altered forms, such as skateboards, billboards, succotash, yurts, paintings, pyramids, tattoos, gardens, medieval armor, and divided highways. While these objects and forms are not the only significant aspects of culture, they are uniquely telling, and can indicate the beliefs of people and societies that use them (Prown, 2001). The study of material forms and objects is important because they are pervasive and they embody and perpetuate ideas about cultures, regions, religions, nations, and individual and collective identities.

Why Study Material Culture in Art Education?

Blandy and Bolin (2003) advocate that art education consider a material culture orientation for the following reasons:

- Material culture promotes critical understandings of objects around us so that we are less likely to be manipulated regarding them.
- Material culture includes items of all kinds and not just those of the elite.
- It does not favor only visual aspects, which can be important given that many artworks engage other senses.
- Material culture is holistic because it deals with many aspects of the environment.
- Many art educators already study objects and environments.
- Visual culture education is only a "first approach to the challenges of living and learning" in these complex times (p. 258).

In addition, the study of material culture is particularly related to art-based areas of study including museums and design. Kader (2003) identifies a connection between material culture and the art and artifacts in museums.

As important "organizers of culture" (Diepeveen & Van Laar, 2001) art [and other] museums can influence how we understand important ideas about life and culture (p. 1). Museums not only collect, preserve and display objects of all kinds, but help determine the kinds of attention that we pay to which objects. The field of museum studies also emphasizes collecting and object-based learning (Miller, 1998).

Marschalek (2005) advocates the study of design in art education. Importantly, rather than focus only on influential movements such as the Bauhaus, some historians and curators (Blauvelt, 2003; Dormer, 1990; Forty, 1986) include a very wide range of human-made forms when discussing design. Additionally, "self-consciously designed products" (Blauvelt, 2003, p. 15) increasingly populate the landscape of student lives. Thus, material culture studies and the study of design have strong areas of convergence.

Because of the influence objects can have in daily life and society, their relation to art-based areas of study including museums and design, this article advocates the study of everyday objects in the art classroom. I believe that the inclusion of everyday objects should supplement, but not replace, the study of widely accepted art forms such as painting and sculpture.

When considering why objects end up in our homes (or in museums) it is important to consider the cultural forces associated with consumer desire and marketing in addition to any other perceived need for owning that object.

Suggestions for Studying Material Culture in the Art Classroom

The following are suggestions for studying everyday objects in art classrooms, some of which are drawn from material culture studies. Since material culture is extremely diverse—as are ideas about what kinds of objects might be considered "everyday"—no single suggestion is essential.

Categorization and Interdisciplinary/Integrated Curricular Approaches

How and whether people categorize objects can have important implications. Some educators and historians advocate categorizing objects into large organizing ideas for study (Kader, 2003; Prown, 2001). For example, clothing might be considered "adornment" (Prown, 2001, p. 88). This kind of categorization suggests *interdisciplinary* curricular approaches in which methods from two or more disciplines are used to explore an object or theme, or in which methods from within a discipline are used to explore an object or theme (Krug & Cohen-Evron, 2000). In contrast, Miller (1998) advocates "freedom from disciplinary boundaries," as an "unshackled" approach that discourages compartmentalizing objects (p. 4). This approach suggests *integrated* curricular methods that do not pay attention to disciplinary boundaries and explore life-centered issues (Krug & Cohen-Evron, 2000). Following an example by Roland Barthes, Graves-Brown suggests that, although cars can be studied as transportation, they might also be compared to houses—"a mobile personal space that is not to be challenged or invaded" (Graves-Brown, 2000b, p. 157). Issues related to community and society might emerge through an exploration of intensive divisions between public/private spheres in which the exteriors of cars convey protective armor and interiors include many of the comforts of home.

Prior Knowledge and Experiences

Because material culture emerges from the myriad materials of everyday life, considering students' prior knowledge and experiences regarding these objects is particularly relevant and important. Considering prior knowledge and experience regarding artworks and objects can meaningfully inform understandings about them when placed in the realm of individual lives (Hein, 1998; Hooper-Greenhill, 1994).

Analyze Specific Characteristics Including Sensory Qualities

When students study an object's specific characteristics and sensory properties they can arrive at more subtle understandings than with investigations that immediately reduce objects to abstract ideas (Miller, 1998). Prown (2001) suggests thoroughly describing and taking inventory of an object's internal aspects, including dimensions, materials, form and features, and if applicable, the content. He also recommends experiencing an object's weight, textures, and other sensory aspects. If the object under consideration is a building or space, Prown recommends that the viewer actually move through it. If the object is not accessible for physical exploration, then "these things must be done imaginatively and empathetically" (p. 81). Rather than immediately reducing Barbie dolls to a negative female stereotype, cultural

theorist Barbara Attfield (1996) explores how particular physical and mechanical characteristics contribute to a limited concept of gender. Barbie's™ minimally articulated limbs, stiff and incapable of complex movement, encourage being viewed rather than performing action, especially when compared to the many-jointed G.I. Joe™ or Action Man™ doll.

Contextualize Objects

Recent material culture studies emphasize the thorough contextualization of objects. Although perhaps "maddeningly holistic" (Martin & Garrison, 1997, p. 14), viewers should strive to study as much as they can that is relevant to an object—all the "relationships necessary for discerning the object's meaning" (Hodder in Martin & Garrison, 1997, pp. 14-15). Prown (2001) suggests that viewers create a plan for researching external information, and looking to other disciplines such as the humanities and social sciences.

Socio-historical Cultural Perspectives

Socio-historical cultural perspectives can provide important ideas for understanding objects and the cultures they come from. For instance, furniture can reveal "many confidential things about the social life of the past and present . . . it amplifies and illustrates the story of civilization in nearly every country, and provides an intimate, personal record of habits, postures, manners, fashions and follies" (Gloag, 1966, p. 1). Design historian John Gloag (1966) finds that overstuffed chairs in Europe and the U.S. indicate a need for comfort that would have been unheard of several hundred years earlier.

Production, Circulation, and Exchange

How an object is made, with what materials, and the ways that it circulates—how it is bought, sold, or exchanged—can affect how a viewer understands it. A wheel-thrown ceramic mug may have been acquired in part because it bears the marks of a maker's hand, because it demonstrates a respected way of object-making or because its one-of-a-kind status is perceived as meaningful in relation to mass-produced items (Dormer, 1990). The mug might be offered for sale at a local shop that someone has chosen intentionally to patronize. Today's ubiquitous mass-produced objects, in contrast, are part of an interrelated series of cultural mechanisms and mass-marketing that deftly tap into particular desires (Dormer, 1990). The rationale for why we buy material forms can be associated with three aspects of consumerism: the affordability, availability, and desirability regarding each particular material form (Martin, 1993). Thus, when considering why objects end up in our homes (or in museums) it is important to consider the cultural forces associated with consumer desire and marketing in addition to any other or perceived need for owning that object.

Utilitarian and Symbolic Functions

Investigating the functions of objects—including both the utilitarian and symbolic functions—can be informative (Preston, 2000). For example, shoes have a utilitarian function of protecting feet and a symbolic function of communicating ideas and values about the wearer. Red high top Converse™ sneakers communicate something different (non-conformity, perhaps) than a pair of white leather tennis shoes. Commonplace utilitarian and symbolic functions can be called *conventional functions*.

Objects constantly gain and lose both kinds of functions, although some retain them for a long time (Preston, 2000). Once used by basketball teams, red high top Converse™ sneakers are now understood to have inadequate and outdated support and cushioning, and thus have lost their utilitarian function for this context. The high top sneakers may have once symbolized youth culture but might now symbolize rebellion, depending on who is wearing them and in what context. If a female student wears them to the prom with a traditional dress we might call the sneakers symbolically *unconventional*.

This example illustrates another important aspect of function—that it is through how people actually use things that cultural change occurs (Martin, 1993; Myers, 2001; Preston, 2000). Changes in usage can accumulate and manifest as shifts in cultural and societal needs and desires, and even cultural resistance. This possibility acknowledges the hopeful scenario that people "are not passive consumers . . . creativity and individual meaning are the dominion of the user as well as the maker" (Martin, 1993, p. 157). For example, if enough women start wearing sneakers with prom dresses, the once unconventional practice might become commonplace. An example regarding bicycles occurred in the early 1970s when small groups of people started riding and racing old, hardy fat-tire bicycles in rugged terrain, which slowly led to the development of the mountain bike.

One function change would be to use the red high tops as doorstops or to put them in a museum exhibition. Both of these changes are *recontextualized/new* functions. Another change would be to attach roller skates to the soles to create a *restructured/new* function. People have some agency in determining the utilitarian and symbolic functions of objects and functions can change because people can adapt or alter them for different purposes.

Cultural Impact

Considering the cultural associations and impact regarding objects is important. Cars, for example, have "transformed social relations through perceptions of space and time," and "changed work patterns and living arrangements" (Graves-Brown, 2000b, p. 159). Cars can symbolize many different ideas, including "social status, power, rebellion" (p. 158) and are often associated with masculinity in many cultures. Although a single object may not radically affect a culture, the accumulation of many objects put to similar uses can.

Summary: Understanding Objects

These suggestions can serve as guides to use when studying objects. Thus, when exploring a specific object, one might consider the following:

- as many contextual aspects as possible, including socio-historical/cultural information;
- the implications of categorizing it using logical or expected categories;
- the implications of considering unconventional categorization or comparisons;
- students' prior knowledge and experience regarding that object;
- its specific, material, sensory characteristics;



- its functions, uses and symbolic meanings;
- any changes in or unusual functions, uses and symbolic meanings associated with the object;
- any cultural resistance that may be indicated by changes in or unusual functions, uses and symbolic meanings associated with the object;
- its larger cultural associations and impact.

Student learning can be influenced depending on whether they encounter real objects or reproductions of them. When students study reproductions they can investigate objects that may otherwise be logistically difficult. When they study actual objects, students can engage in direct explorations of texture, surface qualities, presence, and other sensory aspects that they cannot perceive thoroughly otherwise.

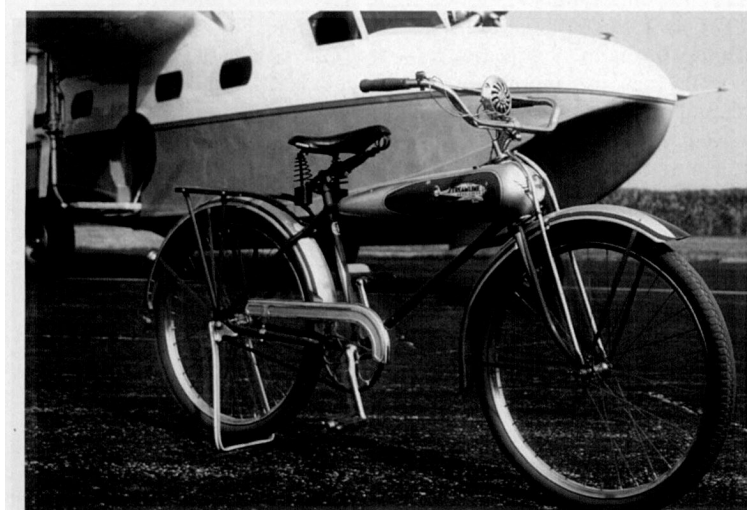
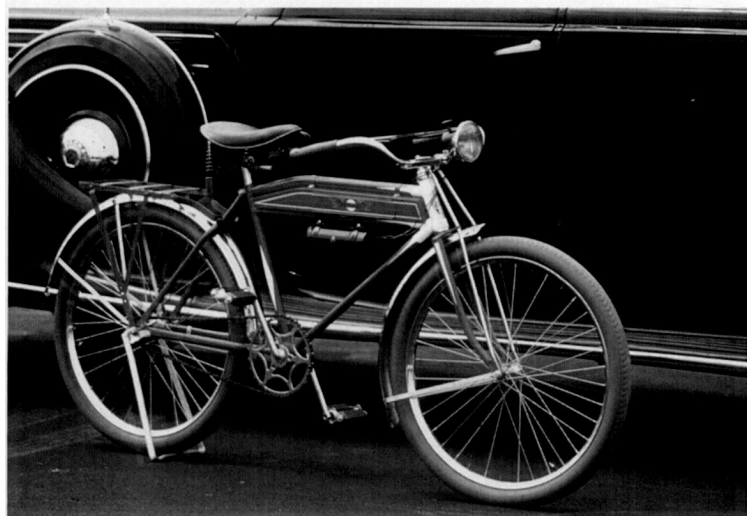
Because of the legacy of art criticism in art education, the field is ideally positioned to explore meanings of objects. Ideas from art criticism such as a consideration of the worlds from which artworks emerge, the differing interpretations they can have, that interpretations are persuasive arguments (Barrett, 2000), and the importance of visual characteristics and of describing those characteristics, are all valuable to the understanding of objects. Graves-Brown's (2000a) assertion that conventions evolve around "shared understandings" (p. 6) is congruent with Barrett's statement that interpretations are both individually and communally-based (Barrett, 2000). Teachers should encourage students to investigate identity-based factors that influence their understandings of artworks [and objects] and how those artworks [and objects] connect with life (Burkhart, 1997). Thus, art critical inquiry, expanded to include some of the previously described suggestions from material culture studies, comprises a useful set of ideas with which to explore everyday objects.

Bicycles: A Classroom Example

I conducted a classroom study involving two classes of 6th graders that lasted for two 40-minute class periods. The study focused on three facets of material culture: establishing the importance of studying objects in our daily environments; investigating a particular everyday object with which they were likely to be familiar—bicycles; and connecting everyday material objects with design. I chose bicycles because of the strong likelihood that students would find them relevant and appealing, and because of the bicycle's cultural impact. Due to logistical and time restraints, slides and visual resource packets were used.

I began by asking students why people might study human-made objects such as pyramids or cars. Student replies included concerns for future object design, such as "to figure out how to make them," and for "inspiration." Other students emphasized historical/cultural aspects, such as "to find out what happened there" and "why they made them." Students also considered their prior knowledge of and experiences with bicycles. When asked what they enjoyed about bicycles, several students cited sensory aspects, such as, "the wind in your face," "going fast down a hill" and "reaching a high speed."

Issues related to consumerism and identity arose when students discussed who might not be able to own or ride a bicycle. Two students indicated economic factors, such as "poor



From top: Figure 1. Early tandem bicycle (c. 1890); Figure 2. 1933 B-10E Motorbike. Arnold Schwinn & Co.; and Figure 3. 1934 Aerocycle Streamliner. Arnold Schwinn & Co. Images courtesy of the Bicycle Museum of America.

people” and “the homeless.” Two other students noted that people in wheelchairs could not ride bicycles, whereupon the students considered that wheelchairs do have wheels, and were later able to design either a bicycle or a wheelchair.

The students received chronological, historical information (Hurd & Pridmore, 1995). Several students expressed surprise at seeing an early side-by-side tandem bicycle, which they learned were called “sociables” and were intended to rid bicycling of its usually solitary nature (see Figure 1). Two students correctly postulated that one bicycle was made of hickory because of an experiential/sensory factor: it might have a softer ride than early iron-rimmed bicycles called “boneshakers.”

Students learned about aspects of consumerism, technological advances, and mass-marketing regarding the bicycle. For example, due to lagging Depression-era sales, Arnold Schwinn tapped into the new motorcycle zeitgeist associated with the open road and freedom. The 1933 “B-10E Motorbike” (Figure 2) sported new balloon tires, headlight, taillight, tank, horn, kickstand and “saddle.” Subsequent bike designs often referenced transportation. Celebrating streamline design and the machine, the 1934 “Aerocycle” (Figure 3) resembled an airplane fuselage, which one student thought helped him imagine it could “go fast.” Technological advancements such as the all-aluminum frame of the 1936 Silver King “Flo-Cycle” (Figure 4) surprised a few students. Several students were surprised by the cost (around \$30.00) and popularity of these bicycles during the Depression. Designer Viktor Schrekengost, creator of the slimmer 1965 Sears “Space Liner” (Figure 5) understood that “Children want to imagine an object as more than what it is” (Hurd & Pridmore, 1995, p. 142). When asked to do so, several students readily connected his futuristic design to historical contexts—the burgeoning space program of the 1960s. One student noted that the chain guard was “speedy and rocket-like.” Students learned that mountain bikes have referenced the Wild West and Manifest Destiny, as indicated by names such as “High Sierra” and “Diablo.”

Students learned about aspects of the bicycle’s cultural impact in the U.S. (Hurd & Pridmore, 1995). For example, somewhat reasonable prices and an egalitarian philosophy during the bicycle boom of the late 1800s allowed cycling to become accessible to many men, including Chinese and Japanese men—and soon thereafter many women—however, African Americans such as champion racer “Major” Taylor often encountered overt prejudice. Bicycles were instrumental in the social revolution of women, gave many women more social independence, and helped loosen strict Victorian dress codes with the emergence of “rational dress.” Several female students named and described bloomers, which the bicycle boom helped popularize. No student could come up with an adequate reason why women’s bicycles should retain the structurally inferior drop frame originally designed to accommodate long dresses. This aspect coupled with often stereotypically gendered colors demonstrates the bicycle’s strong gender coding.

Emerging from the tradition of customized low-rider cars, students also learned about low-rider bicycles, a means of ethnic pride prevalent among some Latino youth, and popular with many other people as well. Made from mass-produced bikes, these low-slung hybrids give *restructured/new* functions to the



From top: Figure 4. 1936 Silver King Flo-Cycle. Monarch Bicycle Co.; Figure 5. 1965 Space Liner. Sears, Roebuck & Co.; and Figure 6. 1972 Orange Krater. Arnold Schwinn & Co. Images courtesy of the Bicycle Museum of America.

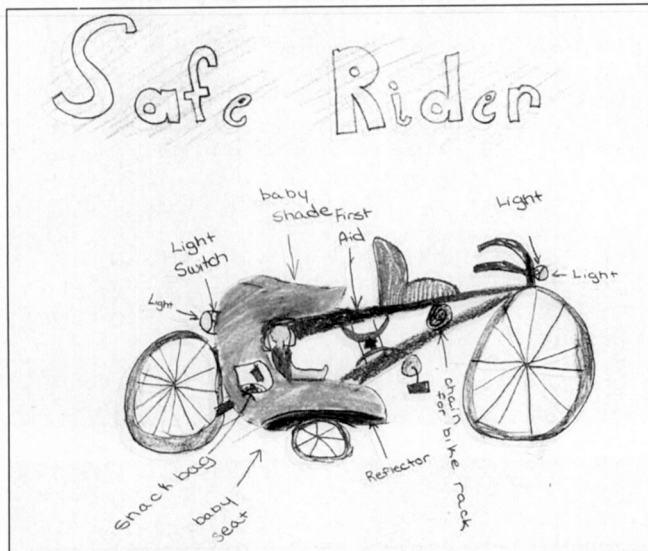


Figure 7. Safe Rider.

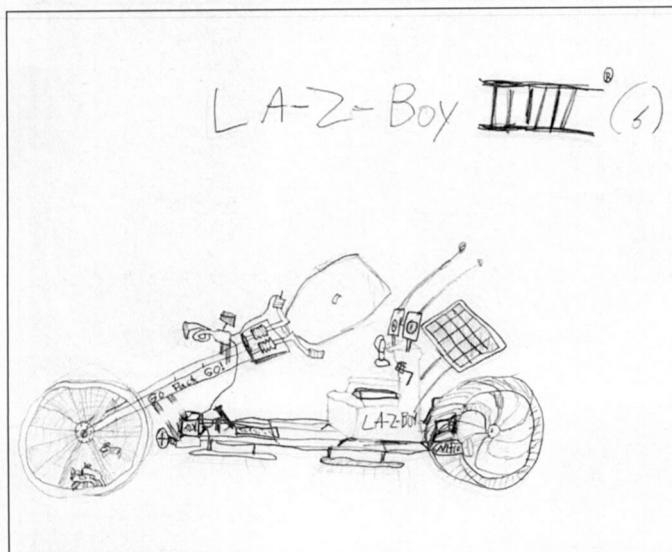


Figure 8. Lazy Boy IIIIII.

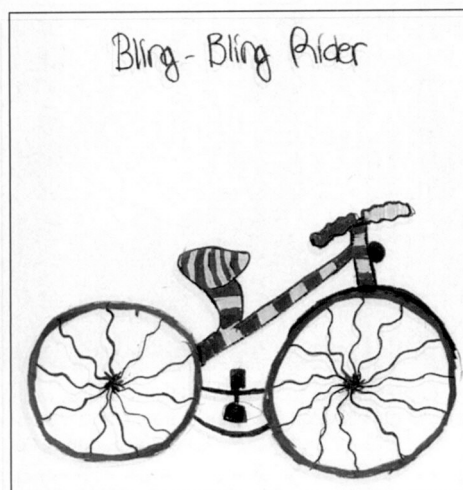


Figure 9. Bling-Bling Rider.

Students connected ideas from the classroom session to design, thoughtfully combining visual features, function, and cultural messages in their drawings of a personally meaningful object while remaining mindful of its impact on and usefulness for others.

original, since these typically radical alterations frequently involve powerful hydraulics that allow bicycles to “hop,” or other ride-changing features. These resplendent vehicles are frequently given a *recontextualized/new* function as artistic objects when put on exhibition and judged. Many of these were influenced by the chopper-style banana seat bicycle of the 1970s (Figure 6), which in turn referenced chopper motorcycles and the rebellious attitude of *Easy Rider*.

At the end of the second classroom session, I asked students to fill out a questionnaire focusing on what if anything they valued about studying objects of material culture, and what they learned about bicycles. On the questionnaires, students stated that they valued learning about material culture for two primary reasons. About half of the students appreciated learning about the histories of people, as for example, to “know how life works for people.” The other half mostly valued learning about objects, generally; as one student said, so “we can create new things.” Students valued learning about bicycles for very similar reasons and several students also wrote that bicycles can represent ideas such as the “different themes that simulate types of travel.”

Students’ bicycle design drawings exhibited three primary aspects: incorporating new technologies; comfort and safety; and creating strong messages to attract buyers. New technologies included GPS navigating systems, OnStar™, MP3 players, airbags, and solar panels. Music players of some kind were the most frequently included special feature. Safety features included headlights, taillights, bumpers, and densely padded seats (see Figure 7). Some of the new technologies such as airbags are connected with safety.

Speed-oriented designs, such as “The Speedster,” were by far the most popular mass-marketed message chosen by the students. Aggressive attitudes, such as in the “Demonic Demon”—with flame graphics—were the second most popular message. Other bicycle designs reflected environments, such as the “New York Cruiser” and “Tropical Cruise,” and still others contemporary rhetoric, as in the chopper-style “Lazy Boy IIIIII” (see Figure 8), and the wildly colorful “Bling Bling Rider” (see Figure 9). Some were gentle and dreamy, such as “A Starry Ride” emblazoned with two large cartoon stars, and “The Rose,” every inch of which was covered with painted roses and sported large flat flower petals for spokes.

The vast majority of designs were stereotypically gender-differentiated in message and/or color. Female students drew the few drawings that included side cars to carry babies. Designs referenced automobiles (as in shock absorbers and navigating systems), domestic environments (as in televisions), and other bicycles, (as in tanks and bulbous headlights). About one third of the designs featured low-rider or chopper styling. All wheelchairs alluded to domestic environments.

Conclusion

In this article, I have presented reasons for studying material culture in the art classroom and have made suggestions regarding how students might investigate everyday objects. In a classroom study, students demonstrated a willingness to explore objects pertinent to their lives, showing interest through their responses, designs, and on-task behaviors. Students exhibited an interest in considering how objects affect society in terms of function, symbolism, and cultural impact. Finally, students connected ideas from the classroom session to design, thoughtfully combining visual features, function, and cultural messages in their drawings of a personally meaningful object while remaining mindful of its impact on and usefulness for others. These results bode well for including everyday objects in the art classroom.

If it makes sense for art education to foster critical understandings of the vast influx of visual images, it also makes sense to encourage similar understandings of all sorts of material objects and forms because they too inform, suggest, prescribe, and symbolize. Our lives are constituted through the infinite variety of objects around us. By critically considering them, we can achieve a fuller understanding of contemporary life.

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