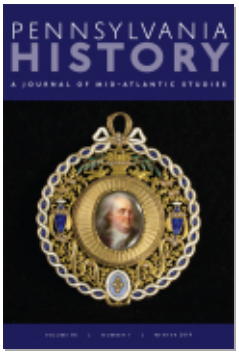
The Power of Objects in Eighteenth-Century British America by Jennifer Van Horn (review)



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for teachers to stimulate classroom discussions focusing on how inferences about past peoples are derived from a mix of archaeological data, historical accounts, and ethnographic sources. Some of that information, especially archaeological and historical details, are specific to local areas, whereas ethnographic material is typically drawn from many parts of the world.

Adult readers will find much of interest in extended treatments of what archaeologists examine, how those materials are collected, and why they are studied. One such example is Stephen Warfel's essay on how archaeological data complement what can be gleaned from historical documents. The biased nature of all such sources of information, archaeological as well as historical, is a good place to start students thinking about how archaeologists build evidence-based perspectives on past societies and why they changed over time.

The book's temporal coverage is brought up to the present by Robert Winters, a Shawnee, in an essay that reminds readers that Indian cultures are not simply a thing of the past. His experience as an Indian in the twenty-first century and archaeology's role in promoting greater cultural understanding are messages all of us in contemporary America should think deeply about.

The authors, and the other contributors, are to be congratulated for achieving the near impossible: a book that everyone from young readers to professional archaeologists will find enjoyable and rewarding to read. They nicely balance the challenges of making sense of the archaeological record with what is now known about Pennsylvania's rich cultural heritage extending many millennia into the past.

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Jennifer Van Horn. *The Power of Objects in Eighteenth-Century British America*. Chapel Hill: Published for the Omohundro Institute of Early American History and Culture, Williamsburg, Virginia, by the University of North Carolina Press, 2017. Pp. 456. 11 color plates, 130 halftones, notes, index. Hardcover, $49.95.

In *The Power of Objects in Eighteenth-Century British America*, Jennifer Van Horn skillfully illustrates the transformative power of material culture on

elite British American society. Deftly interweaving material evidence with literary and historical texts, Van Horn demonstrates how objects like portraits, dressing tables, prints, prostheses, and gravestones can, quite literally, transform bodies, crafting a polite and mannered society. Themes of politeness, civility and the creation of national and individual identities are leitmotifs in this volume, as is the distancing of one's self from the "savage other" or the wild, discussed here as African Americans and Native Americans. Each chapter focuses on a different type of material culture, progressing from more public-facing objects, such as long-view prints of cities, portraits, and tombstones, to more individual or private artifacts, including artificial limbs and dressing tables where women practiced the art of concealment through toilette.

Cityscape "long views" of American urban areas carved from the wilderness served as a counter to British misconceptions about the colonies as places of savagery. Often done at massive scales and from the vantage point of the harbor, these prints were detailed enough to provide American funders with meticulous views of the city's buildings and monuments. These long views presented orderly vistas of places like Philadelphia and Charleston, but at a scale that hid the filth, disease, and crime that is a part of any city landscape. Van Horn argues that the London printers who produced the long views downscaled the prints for British magazines, intentionally diminishing the importance and prominence of North American cities.

While long views illustrated civilization carved from the wilderness, American elites used portraiture to demonstrate politeness and civility at an individual level. The sitter was often placed in a setting that provided a larger context for that individual's urbanity and livelihood, showing connections to the larger world of trade, commerce, and the arts. Van Horn argues that in North America, and particularly in Philadelphia, the presence of British-born and European-trained artists helped create an aesthetic community of elites who had been transformed and civilized by portraiture. Through the hands of the artist, human passions were tamed to create neutral countenances and bodily postures that expressed the sitter's civilized character. As with the cityscapes, British authors and theorists denigrated American artistic progress, arguing that Americans, through the contact with other races, were "poorly controlled barbarians" (149). Native Americans and African Americans appear throughout this book as the "savage other," serving as a counterpoint to white elite society.

While British American elites emulated their peers in England, some cultural traditions were impractical in the colonies. Intramural burials within churches allowed wealthy British citizens to segregate themselves from the lower classes buried outside; the hot and humid climate of Charleston made this practice impossible. Forced to use the same churchyard burial grounds as less socially acceptable classes, elite Charlestonians sought to separate themselves in death by erecting detailed portrait gravestones. In the socially leveling communal space of the graveyard, these stones and their text extolling the virtues and politeness of the deceased were a way of carving out an eternal "civil" space for oneself after death. These gravestone portraits mirrored miniatures that were worn or carried by the elite as mementos of loved ones.

In chapter 4 Van Horn uses portraits of young American females painted in masquerade clothing as a metaphor for pre-Revolutionary America throwing off bonds of British identity. Most of these masquerade portraits were created of young women during courtship, at the peak of their greatest social and sexual power. At this particular time, females were encouraged to conceal interest in particular suitors, thereby maintaining power over them until they finally unmask their true desires. America is portrayed as a young, virginal female in the midst of a difficult courtship with Britain—a courtship where America has begun to recognize the mask of false civility and politeness slipping away, revealing Britain's true treachery toward America.

Continuing her examination of women, concealment, and civility, Van Horn turns to dressing tables and their roles in women's toilette. Cosmetics could be used to mask bodily imperfections and blemishes, which were viewed in the eighteenth century as a reflection of one's true character. Women were regarded as the weaker sex, in need of a firm guiding male hand for control over their base desires and savagery. At the dressing table, a woman could transform her private and domestic self to more public-facing, civic-minded roles. The dressing tables themselves, constructed with numerous hidden compartments and swinging mirrors, were a metaphor for the practice of toilette being one of both concealment and revelation.

Van Horn also examines the meaning of prosthetic limbs in early America, both as a symbol of the colony's separation from the larger body of England and their relevance to individuals. While dismemberment threatened the gentile status of elite white men, affecting their manhood as well as their literal stance within the community, artificial limbs helped restore that former status.

The volume, which is lavishly illustrated with both black-and-white photographs and color plates, will be of interest to both historians and scholars of material culture. One shortcoming of this book was that the material culture chosen—portraits, long views, carved tombstones, dressing tables—are objects of the elite. The opinions of most of the population—the poor, middling classes, African Americans, and Native Americans—about these forms of material culture, which they surely viewed, rather than possessed or commissioned are not considered. Only in the epilogue do common people appear, bound with the elite into a new cohesive society by prints of George Washington and cream-colored earthenware.

Van Horn shows how objects illuminated the escalating tensions between Great Britain and British America during the colonial and early Federal periods, as British Americans used material culture to connect with—as well as distance themselves from—Great Britain. Objects shape and transform, but people also transform the meanings and uses of the material culture that surrounds them. Van Horn's deep reading of the entanglement of human behavior and objects is material culture scholarship at its finest.

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Mark Whitaker. *Smoketown: The Untold Story of the Other Great Black Renaissance*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 2018. 432 pp., also on Blackstone Audio. Hardcover, $17.93.

Mark Whitaker (1957–) is an extremely affable man with the demeanor of a professional journalist, which is not surprising considering that his credentials include stints as former managing editor of CNN Worldwide, former Washington bureau chief for NBC News, and reporter/eventual lead editor at Newsweek.[1] I had the pleasure to meet and speak with Whitaker directly at the August Wilson Colloquium in Pittsburgh in April of 2018. The August Wilson Society, of which I am a member, invited him to Pittsburgh to discuss his recent book, *Smoketown: The Untold Story of the Other Great Black Renaissance*, which mentions August Wilson, along with some of Wilson's family.

Whitaker's Pittsburgh connection begins with his grandfather, who was one of Pittsburgh's first black undertakers. His grandmother opened her