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E. McClung Fleming

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# Artifact Study

## A Proposed Model

*E. McClung Fleming*

EVERY CULTURE, however primitive or advanced, is absolutely dependent on its artifacts for its survival and self-realization.<sup>1</sup> The earliest records of man include objects made to satisfy his many needs—to extend his physical and psychic power over nature and his fellow man, delight his fancy, affirm his sense of form, and create symbols of meaning. If a basic wonder about man is his capacity for building culture, certainly the next wonder is his astounding capacity for making things as part of his culture. In this he surpasses the animal a thousand times in cunning, power, imaginativeness, beauty, destructiveness, and grandeur. To know man we must study the things he has made—the Parthenon, the Panama Canal, Stonehenge, the computer, the Taj Mahal, the space capsule, Michelangelo's *Pietà*, the highway cloverleaf, the Great Pyramid, Rembrandt's self-portraits. The artifacts made and used by a people are not only a basic expression of that people; they are, like culture itself, a necessary means of man's self-fulfillment.

Study of artifacts is therefore a primary humanistic study. Along with the study of man's physical constitution, his ideas, and institutions, the physi-

<sup>1</sup> The word *culture*, as used in this paper, can be defined as "that complex whole which includes artifacts, beliefs, art, all the other habits acquired by man as a member of society, and all products of human activity as determined by these habits." Clyde Kluckhohn and W. H. Kelly, "The Concept of Culture," *The Science of Man in the World Crisis*, ed. R. Linton (New York: Columbia University Press, 1945), pp. 78–106; see also A. L. Kroeber and Clyde Kluckhohn, *Culture: A Critical Review of Concepts and Definitions* (New York: Vintage Books, 1963). The word *artifact*, as used in this paper, can be defined as "a product of human workmanship," *Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary* (1959), or "anything made by man at any time," Ivor Noël Hume, *A Guide to Artifacts of Colonial America* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1970), p. 4.

cal settings in which he has lived, and the records of his actions in time, there is an obvious, natural, universal fascination with the things man has made. Kenneth Clark has popularized a dictum of Ruskin's: "Great nations write their autobiographies in three manuscripts, the book of their deeds, the book of their words, and the book of their art. Not one of these books can be understood unless we read the two others, but of the three the only trustworthy one is the last."<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, the exploration of the things man has made may be one of the least developed of our humanistic studies. Utilizing Leslie A. White's three main subdivisions of culture—material, social, and mental—it can be argued that material culture<sup>3</sup> has received less systematic attention than the other two.

Certain academic disciplines do, to be sure, center their attention on artifacts. First in popularity is art history, with its study of those works of man having a relatively high aesthetic component—architecture, sculpture, painting, graphics, and decorative arts. Second, perhaps, is archaeology, prehistoric and historic, with its examination and analysis of the entire spectrum of man-made objects recovered from the earth. A more recently organized discipline is the history of technology, which gives serious attention to artifacts made to perform work. Far less organized than these three disciplines in its approach to artifacts is cultural history, which in many instances has made effective use of

<sup>2</sup> Sir Kenneth Clark, *Civilisation: A Personal View* (London: British Broadcasting Corporation, 1969), p. 1.

<sup>3</sup> Leslie A. White, *The Science of Culture* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1969), pp. 364–65. The term *material culture*, as used in this paper, can be defined as the totality of artifacts in a culture. See Melville J. Herskovits, *Cultural Anthropology* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1963), p. 119.

both practical and artistic objects, but which has not, as yet, developed either models or a methodology for the analysis and interpretation of this kind of primary source material. The first and only session devoted to material culture as such by the American Historical Association was at its 1964 annual meeting, and by the Organization of American Historians at its 1972 annual meeting. Other disciplines analyzing and interpreting material culture include cultural geography and folk culture. A very few universities offer introductions to American culture—notably the University of Pennsylvania, George Washington University, Brown University, the University of Delaware, and St. Mary's College in Maryland—but the use of material culture by historians and social scientists is minimal.

Related loosely to the preceding disciplines but concentrating on specific types of material culture are museums. Of the 6,000 museums in the United States and Canada, some 2,200 might be classified as natural history museums and about 3,600 as cultural history museums. The latter include museums of science and technology, art, and history, though more and more museums—such as historic house museums and outdoor, “living” museums—cannot be neatly classified under these headings. The American Association of Museums defines these institutions chiefly by their collections of artifacts. Their mission is the acquisition, cataloging, conservation, exhibition, study, and interpretation of artifacts. It would be logical to assume that a substantial contribution to the study of material culture should come from the community of numerous and rapidly growing cultural history museums in this country.

Important progress has been made in analysis of the physical properties of museum objects and in methods of preventing their physical deterioration. Important progress, also, has been made in exploring the different ways in which the encounter of observer and object can be promoted through imaginative attention to angles of vision, lighting, and use of multimedia communication. At the information level, techniques are constantly being improved for identifying and cataloging objects in museum collections, moving toward more standardized methods of classification, better methods of material analysis, and devices for faster information retrieval. There has not been equivalent progress in differentiating the information level from the conceptual level in the museum scholar's research with collections, and it is especially on these con-

ceptual levels, which this paper will call cultural analysis and interpretation, that more work remains to be done. For example, the interrelationship of the artifact and its culture is implicit in all that museums say and write about their collections, but relatively few contributions have been made to a theoretical understanding of the ways in which the artifact explicitly implements, expresses, and documents a particular way of life. In short, museums have paid relatively little attention to developing a discipline of artifact study.

#### A Proposed Model for Artifact Study

THIS PAPER is an attempt to present a model for artifact study.<sup>4</sup> Hopefully, it is a model that can identify many of the possible approaches to the subject, provide a framework relating them to each other, and thus suggest the outlines of a program of collaborative research for all who are engaged in study of the artifact. The model has been developed in the context of the study of early American decorative arts. With this background it doubtless bears the special impress of thinking oriented toward cultural history, but it should be equally applicable in other areas of study. The model utilizes two conceptual tools—a fivefold classification of the basic properties of an artifact and a set of four operations to be performed on these properties (Fig. 1). The model will be applied to a seventeenth-

<sup>4</sup> For one of the few other models suggested see Craig Gilborn, “Pop Pedagogy: Looking at the Coke Bottle,” *Museum News* 47, no. 41 (Dec. 1968): 12–18.

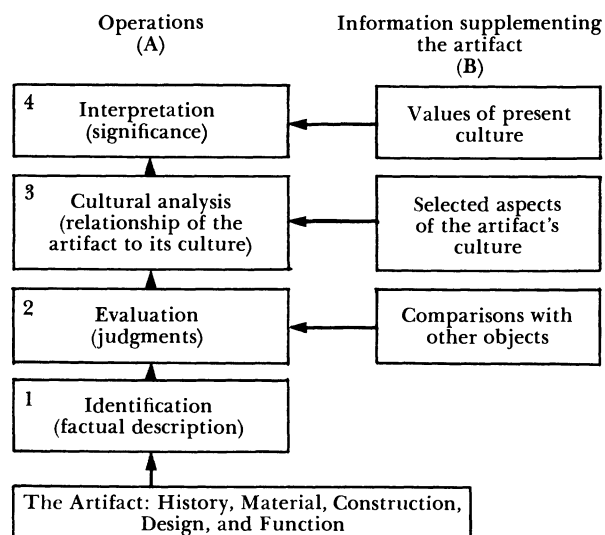


FIG. 1. Diagram of a model of artifact study.



FIG. 2. Court cupboard, Salem, Mass., 1680. H. 57 $\frac{3}{4}$ "", W. 50", D. 21 $\frac{5}{8}$ ". (Winterthur 66.1261.)

century American court cupboard (Fig. 2) in the Winterthur Museum collection.

The five basic properties provide a formula for including and interrelating all the significant facts about an artifact. These properties of an artifact are its history, material, construction, design, and function. History includes where and when it was made, by whom and for whom and why and successive changes in ownership, condition, and function. Material involves what the object is made of—woods, fibers, ceramic bodies, metals, glass, and so on. Construction has to do with the techniques of manufacture employed, workmanship, and the way parts are organized to bring about the object's function. Design includes the structure, form, style, ornament, and iconography of the object. Function embraces both the uses (intended functions) and the roles (unintended functions) of the object in its culture, including utility, delight, and communication.

The four operations to be performed on the five properties yield answers to most of the important questions we want to ask about an artifact. These operations are identification (including classification, authentication, and description), which results in a body of distinctive facts about the artifact; evaluation, which results in a set of judgments about the artifact, usually based on comparisons with other examples of its kind; cultural analysis, which examines the various interrelationships of an artifact and its contemporary culture; and interpretation, which suggests the meaning and significance of the artifact in relation to aspects of our own culture. Each of these operations may involve each of the five properties of the artifact, and each successive operation is dependent upon those preceding it. Identification is the foundation for everything that follows; interpretation is the crown. A further word about each of these four operations is in order.

*Identification:* Identification should begin with the question, What is it? The answer is classification—specification of the general class to which the particular object under consideration belongs. Most current systems of classification are unsystematic. Many are based on function (chair, floor covering, coffeepot, firearm), some on material (textile, glassware), others on construction (painting, print), or on iconography and subject matter (map). The adoption of a more uniform and exact classification scheme for artifacts should be considered a major item of unfinished business in the develop-

ment of a rigorous discipline of material culture study.

The second step in identification is authentication,<sup>5</sup> to determine whether the object is genuine. Is it actually what it purports to be in date, provenance, authorship, material, and construction? Is it a fake or forgery made with a deliberate intent to deceive or a reproduction made without intent to deceive? Is this log cabin the one in which Daniel Boone actually lived? Is this sword truly the one worn by Washington at Yorktown? Was this silver tankard, with its Paul Revere mark, really made by Revere? The skills of connoisseurship or laboratory analysis, or both, may be used in authentication, which is sometimes referred to as "external criticism." Authentication is the precondition for accurate identification. Another element in identification is description, possibly by both words and images. Description often begins with measurements that specify the dimensions and sometimes the weight of the object. The essence of description is the concise and orderly delineation of the physical aspects of the object.

The chief objective of identification is to provide accurate information about the five properties of the artifact. This information must obviously be based on authentication and will either precede or follow description. Since it is the rare artifact that fully identifies itself with a maker's mark or label, a date, an owner's initials, and that remains (like a building or a gravestone) in the place of its origin, this information must be hunted out. Finding it can involve a combination of connoisseurship and extensive, painstaking research utilizing not only a number of primary and secondary verbal sources (probate records, family records, bills of sale, newspaper advertisements, design books, emblem books, travel accounts, city registers, and so forth), but also a growing range of sophisticated technical hardware. The tools of the scientist are increasingly employed by museums to reveal physical and chemical properties not apparent to the naked eye. Authentication can hinge on the results of these investigations, which necessarily require a knowledge of what was technologically feasible in various historical periods.

Identification can be simple and brief—as in the case of picture captions, exhibit labels, and catalog cards, or it can be extended and detailed. Extended

<sup>5</sup> Oscar Handlin, ed., *Harvard Guide to American History* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1955), pp. 22–25.

identification might involve discovering biographical details about the maker, the purchaser, or the owner of the artifact; the cultural geography of its place of origin; the sources and characteristics of the material; the origins and antecedents of the techniques of construction or the design motifs employed; the history of the functional form; or the meaning of the iconography. An important type of extended identification contributed by art historians is the location of a center from which the style or ornament of an artifact was originally diffused, and the modifications this style underwent.<sup>6</sup> It is obvious that the amount of extended identification that can be undertaken is unlimited. And the fruits of this research can be embodied in monographs that are not artifact studies in themselves, but can form part of, or contribute to, the identification operation in artifact studies. One property of the artifact—function—so obviously involves the whole artifact rather than its details and so uniquely relates the artifact to its culture that the extended identification of function is considered to be part of the operation of cultural analysis discussed below.

*Evaluation:* Although our understanding of an artifact must begin with the identification of its properties, it can be greatly extended by the evaluation of those properties in terms of our culture's value standards. There are two kinds of evaluation. One has to do with judgments of aesthetic quality and workmanship, i.e. appropriateness of material and texture, skill and taste of craftsmanship, effectiveness of overall design (proportion, balance, unity), and expressiveness of form, style, and ornament. Such judgments result in a ranking of the artifact's qualities, for example excellent or poor, and depend on a subjective exercise of the observer's taste and discrimination. The other kind of evaluation consists of factual comparisons of one object with others of its kind in quantifiable terms such as relative size, cost, rarity, or temporal primacy as determined through objective research. If extensive, this research may become the operation of cultural analysis as defined below. Evaluation can result in applying to the object such adjectives

<sup>6</sup> See, for example, R. Peter Mooz, "An Art Historian's View: A Commentary on Style in Country Art," in *Country Cabinetwork and Simple City Furniture*, ed. John D. Morse (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1970). Erwin Panofsky uses the term "iconographical analysis," as distinguished from "iconological interpretation," for the extended identification of the influence of style centers. Panofsky, *Meaning in the Visual Arts* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1955), pp. 35-40.

as similar, unique, early example, avant-garde, *retardataire*, and so on. Evaluation might compare the given artifact with other artifacts made by the same craftsman, or it might compare the given artifact with similar ones made by other craftsmen in the same subculture. An artifact made in one region might be compared with a similar one made in another region.<sup>7</sup>

Identification and evaluation constitute the special province of connoisseurship and curatorship. When these operations are accomplished through direct perception—the trained eye and knowing touch matured by the special kind of artifact expertise resulting from extensive experience in examining and comparing objects—and the findings are interpreted by a well-stocked memory bank of precise images, we are in the presence of the connoisseur.<sup>8</sup> When connoisseurship is supplemented by additional skills in the cataloging, care, conservation, exhibition of objects, and scientific examination, we are in the presence of the curator. Identification, and to a lesser extent evaluation, provide the essential building blocks for conceptual generalization about the artifact. These generalizations represent the fruit of the third and fourth operations, cultural analysis and interpretation.

*Cultural Analysis:* The third operation, cultural analysis, begins where identification and evaluation leave off. It is found in any one of a dozen different kinds of artifact study that seek to examine in depth the relation of the artifact to aspects of its own culture. Certainly it embraces the largest potential of artifact study.

One important form of cultural analysis deals with the functions performed by the artifact in its culture. Unlike the other artifact properties of material, construction, and design, function involves both the concrete and the abstract aspects of the artifact, the reasons for its initial manufacture, its various intended uses, and its unintended roles. Functional analysis, indeed, reveals the essential importance and meaning of the things man has made. Ordinarily the most obvious and simplest function of an artifact is its utility as a tool. Discussion of the utility function will necessarily involve discussion of the human behavior associated

<sup>7</sup> For example see Charles F. Montgomery, *American Furniture: The Federal Period* (New York: Viking Press, 1966), p. 229; Alan Gowans, *Images of American Living* (Philadelphia: J. P. Lippincott, 1964), pp. 69, 97.

<sup>8</sup> Montgomery, *American Furniture: The Federal Period*, pp. 48-49.

with the artifact and the social groups of structures engaging in that behavior. The artifact also functions as a vehicle of delight through its form and decoration. Finally, by means of its materials, construction, design, and use of signs and symbols, the artifact functions as a vehicle of communication conveying status, ideas, values, feelings, and meaning. In some cases functional analysis will indicate the ways in which the artifact became an agent of major change within its culture.<sup>9</sup>

Related to functional analysis are several kinds of historical analysis that further seek to indicate the place of the artifact in its culture. For example, the esteem in which an object was held by its culture might be determined from learning the quantity produced or imported, prices paid, and allusions to the particular form in both pictorial and verbal documents of the period. Research in these areas would suggest the social function of the artifact and whether its use was confined to one class or subculture or more widespread.<sup>10</sup> Whatever meaning it held for its culture and how it conveyed that meaning is an essential part of cultural analysis.

Other forms of cultural analysis that may yield significant conceptual generalizations are sampling operations involving a body of related artifacts. For purposes of cultural analysis, artifacts may, for example, be grouped according to one or more of the following criteria: their identification with a specific culture or subculture, geographical area, a single maker or a group of makers, a unique set of physical and aesthetic characteristics, and so on.

<sup>9</sup> For three examples of functional analysis dealing with the utility function see Rodris C. Roth, "Tea Drinking in Eighteenth Century America: Its Etiquette and Equipage," *Contributions from the Museum of History and Technology* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution, 1961); Frank H. Sommer III, "The Functions of American Church Plate," in *Spanish, French, and English Traditions in the Colonial Silver of North America* (Winterthur, Del.: The Henry Francis du Pont Winterthur Museum, 1969); Charles F. Hummel, *With Hammer in Hand: The Dominy Craftsmen of East Hampton, New York* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1968). A good example of an analysis of the function of the artifact as a culture symbol is Alan Trachtenberg, *Brooklyn Bridge: Fact and Symbol* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1965). For a treatment of artifacts as agents of cultural change see Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Co., 1965).

<sup>10</sup> See Bruce R. Buckley, "A Folklorist Looks at the Traditional Craftsman," in *Country Cabinetwork and Simple City Furniture*, ed. John D. Morse (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1970), pp. 265-76.

The purpose in cultural analysis is to isolate characteristics common to the group that enable the researcher to make inferences of a general nature about the society that produced and/or used the body of artifacts. On the basis of one type of sample, cultural analysis might establish a chronology of construction techniques or design traits. The chronology might focus on whether design traits found in one region predated or followed similar design traits found in other regions. Relationships determined from a sample could be graphed to indicate chronological sequences, expressed in tabular form to clarify types and subtypes, or subjected to statistical analysis.<sup>11</sup>

Cultural analysis can carry artifact study beyond description toward explanation by "the explication of those critical links that exist between human behavior and its material products."<sup>12</sup> Some of these links, termed "real intersections," were discussed by George Kubler in a passage in which he underlined the importance in art history of going beyond identification to cultural analysis:

In the history of art, which is a young discipline, it has long been necessary to restrict attention to manageable questions like artistic biography and catalogues and iconography. It is now apparent that those tasks have been accomplished and that we need not repeat them over and over. . . . Many more new tasks lie in connecting the history of art with other fields of thought, by finding intersecting lines of investigation where thought renews both itself and the fields it illuminates. In other words, the history of art can look beyond its own well-worn road to intersections with other roads. These intersections, however, are of two kinds. There are real intersections, as when economic history and silversmithing

<sup>11</sup> For an example of a design chronology, see Margaret Burke, "Massachusetts High Chests, 1710-1780: Regional Characteristics and a Chronology of Design" (seminar report for History 802, University of Delaware, 1972). For examples of typology and seriation see Craig Gilborn, "Pop Pedagogy"; James Deetz and Edwin Dethlefsen, "Death's Head, Cherub, Urn, and Willow," *Natural History* 76, no. 3 (Mar. 1967): 28-37; James Deetz, *Invitation to Archaeology* (Garden City, N.Y.: Natural History Press, 1967), pp. 26-33. For examples of statistical analysis see Anthony N. B. Garvan, "American Church Silver: A Statistical Study," in *Spanish, French, and English Traditions in the Colonial Silver of North America* (Winterthur, Del.: The Henry Francis du Pont Winterthur Museum, 1969), pp. 73-104; Barbara G. Teller, "Ceramics in Providence, 1730-1800: An Inventory Survey," *Antiques* 94 no. 4 (Oct. 1968): 570-77.

<sup>12</sup> James J. F. Deetz, "Ceramics from Plymouth, 1620-1835: The Archaeological Evidence," in *Ceramics in America*, ed. Ian H. G. Quimby (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1973), p. 15.

mind. . . . They exist as possibilities, and it is in them that we can hope to discover some latent system of relations far more instructive than those revealed by the study of real problems.<sup>13</sup>

Kubler's real intersections between the component subsystems of a culture suggest a host of interesting and important research possibilities, most of them of an interdisciplinary nature. This interdisciplinary approach to cultural analysis explores parallels or relationships between the expressive products of one cultural subsystem and similar patterns in other subsystems, e.g. how an artifact relates to the religious beliefs, ideas, standard of living, and politics of its subculture. Panofsky regarded this comparison of the "intrinsic meaning or content" discovered in different cultural subsystems as the ideal meeting ground of the various humanistic disciplines.<sup>14</sup>

Research along these lines, which Richard Sykes argues could be the unifying theme of American studies, is beginning to appear. The intersections between the old silver of American churches and denomination, type of piece, church location, and so on, have been explored by Anthony Garvan with the aid of a computer; and the same scholar has traced relationships between the iconography of New England porringers and Puritan ideas of love and marriage. Intersections between the iconography of Edward Winslow's silver sugar boxes and concepts of courtly love, marriage, and fertility have been suggested by Edward J. Nygren; and Barbara Teller has examined intersections between ownership of four types of imported ceramic forms and three income levels in eighteenth-century Providence. Henry Glassie has studied Anglo-American material culture of the eighteenth century in relation to the Georgian mind-set, and Alan Gowans has pointed out connections between Federal-Adamesque architecture, Federalist politics, and new mercantile wealth. Other real intersections throw light on "the dynamics of change in material objects as a function of changes in the society which produced them," as in the investigation of changes in gravestone iconography in relation to changes in

religion, population, social values, and social organization in early New England by Edwin Dethlefsen and James Deetz.<sup>15</sup>

Kubler's virtual intersections, which can throw a brilliant light on the larger character of the artifact, consist of noncausal, unprovable but possible correspondences and conformities between artifacts and cultural constructs. Examples are studies correlating the pattern of ceramic usage in early Plymouth with that of the Stuart yeoman foodways subsystem; relating living room styles to intergenerational mobility, frequency of church attendance, and political party preference; and hypothesizing that the development of eighteenth-century American Georgian architecture conforms to six principles of maturation.<sup>16</sup>

Two reciprocal methods of procedure in discovering the real and virtual intersections of an artifact with its culture are product analysis (the ways in which a culture leaves its mark on a particular artifact) and content analysis (the ways in which a particular artifact reflects its culture). From the standpoint of product analysis, every artifact—in its history, material, construction, design, and function—is a product of its culture. "Every epoch, everywhere," Edgar Kaufman asserted, "creates the objects it needs in its own spirit, its individual character unmistakably stamped on them." From the standpoint of content analysis, every artifact is a document bearing some content of evidence about its culture, and in this role it can serve as primary source material for the cultural historian.

<sup>13</sup> George A. Kubler, "Time's Perfection and Colonial Art," in *Spanish, French, and English Traditions in the Colonial Silver of North America* (Winterthur, Del.: The Henry Francis du Pont Winterthur Museum, 1969), pp. 8–9.

<sup>14</sup> For an attempt to trace parallel patterns in architecture, painting, sculpture, literature, and music, see Frederick B. Artz, *From the Renaissance to Romanticism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962); Panofsky, *Meaning in the Visual Arts*, p. 39.

<sup>15</sup> Richard E. Sykes, "American Studies and the Concept of Culture: A Theory and Method," *American Quarterly* 15, no. 2, part 2 (Summer 1963, supplement): 263–70; Garvan, "American Church Silver"; Garvan, "The New England Porringer: An Index of Custom," in *Smithsonian Annual Report* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1958), pp. 543–52; Edward J. Nygren, "Edward Winslow's Sugar Boxes: Colonial Echoes of Courtly Love," Yale University Art Gallery *Bulletin* 33, no. 2 (Autumn 1971): 39–52; Barbara G. Teller, "Ceramics in Providence"; Henry Glassie, "Architecture as Cognitive Process" (public lecture, American Civilization Department, Brown University, Dec. 1971); Gowans, *Images of American Living*, pp. 206–9; Dethlefsen and Deetz, "Death's Head, Cherub, Urn, and Willow"; Dethlefsen and Deetz, "Death's Head, Cherub, Urn and Willow Trees: Experimental Archaeology in Colonial Cemeteries," *American Antiquity* 31, no. 4 (Nov. 1966): 502–10.

<sup>16</sup> Deetz, "Ceramics from Plymouth"; Edward O. Lanmann and James S. House, "Living Room Styles and Social Attributes: The Patterning of Material Artifacts in a Modern Urban Community," *Sociology and Social Research* 54, no. 3 (Apr. 1970): 321–43; Gowans, *Images of American Living*, pp. 173–78.



"It is easy to overlook the data afforded by physical survivals and objects of material culture," warns the *Harvard Guide to American History*, "yet such vestiges of the past may be quite as revealing as written records." Artifacts are not only natural facts in themselves, but the evidence they contain can be read to establish historical facts on which the structure of historical interpretation can be raised. These historical facts may indicate the technological level of a culture, the materials at its command, its taste and form preference, quality of craftsmanship, trade relations, standard of living, social usage, popular enthusiasms, and life-style.<sup>17</sup> When the scholar's research subject is a particular artifact, he will probably concentrate on explaining how the shaping influence of the culture made the artifact what it is. When the scholar's subject is a particular culture, he will probably concentrate on extracting evidence from the artifact about the character of its culture.

It is evident that both product and content analysis equally involve the interrelationship of artifacts and culture. Of the two, the former is the more readily accepted and carried out. Content analysis, on the other hand, is a less familiar concept. The general proposition that the structures, tools, dress, jewelry, settlement patterns, and art of a people help us to understand that people is universally accepted: it is the chief basis of all foreign travel and museum visitation. But when the specific question is raised as to just what these objects tell us, the proposition often seems less clear. Little has been written on the specific question as to whether and how artifacts (nonverbal documents) constitute evidence of a culture in the same way as written texts (verbal documents).<sup>18</sup> In fact, procedures in reading the content of a nonverbal document parallel those in reading the content of a verbal document. In each case the would-be reader must start

by being literate. In the case of the verbal document, he must understand the vocabulary of nouns, adjectives, verbs, and prepositions and how they are put together. In the case of the nonverbal document, he must understand the vocabulary of material, construction, design, and function and how they are put together.

Assuming one is literate in the language of the document to be read, it is necessary to begin with identification. The unidentified document is worthless as evidence. Sometimes a document carries its own identification. A letter may indicate where and when it was written, by whom, and to whom; a silver tankard may bear a maker's mark that gives a good clue as to who, where, and when, or a coat of arms that indicates for whom. At other times the document does not identify itself, and extrinsic aids must be used—a comparison of the unidentified item with identified ones, the resort to handwriting experts and connoisseurs of craft construction, the consultation of calendars, atlases, dictionaries, encyclopedias, and handbooks of heraldry. Moreover, not only the general character of the document, but its terms will have to be identified—proper names, place names, reference to events, ornament, and iconography that can be clarified only with the help of outside references. If sound identification is finally made, it does not matter whether it was made by the use of reference tools or not. Certainly no assumption is implied, with either the verbal or the nonverbal document, that the document must "speak for itself" and be self-identifying.

Once validated as authentic and identified, the document can be read for content. The content of each document will be formulated in a series of statements. The artifact is actually a bundle of facts, and its content is, in theory, the sum total of all the statements that result from combining what we know about its properties with what we know about its history. In practice, content is only those statements that seem relevant to our investigation.

Once the content is available, it will normally be evaluated for its importance. Does it constitute new evidence? Does it confirm or contradict existing evidence? In all these steps in reading the content of the artifact, the scholar using the nonverbal document is proceeding through the same operations employed by the scholar using the verbal document. He stands under the same imperative to be objective, to be skeptical, to use public standards, and to use intuition with caution. The conclusions of the one need be no more impressionistic than those of the other.

<sup>17</sup> Edgar Kaufman, *An Exhibition for Modern Living* (Detroit: Detroit Institute of Arts, 1949), p. 40; Handlin, *Harvard Guide to American History*, pp. 61–63; see E. McClung Fleming, "Early American Decorative Arts As Social Documents," *Mississippi Valley Historical Review* 45, no. 2 (Sept. 1958): 276–84. For an example of historians' use of artifacts as evidence see John Demos, *A Little Commonwealth: Family Life in Plymouth Colony* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970), pp. 36–51.

<sup>18</sup> For a discussion of this problem see William B. Hesseltine, "The Challenge of the Artifact," *The Present World of History* (Madison, Wisc.: The American Association for State & Local History, 1959); Fleming, "Early American Decorative Arts As Social Documents"; John Chavis, "The Artifact and the Study of History," *Curator* 7, no. 2 (1964): 156–62.

*Interpretation:* The last of the four basic operations involved in artifact research is interpretation. Whereas cultural analysis was concerned with the relations of the artifact to its culture, interpretation is concerned with the relations of the artifact to our culture. More specifically, interpretation focuses on the relation between some fact learned about the artifact and some key aspect of our current value system, and this relation must be sufficiently intense or rich to have self-evident meaning, significance, or relevance. Interpretation does not result in a statement of fact that can be documented, but a statement of relationship born of what Panofsky calls "synthetic intuition" and imagination that goes beyond documentation. As in content analysis, an artifact is not subject to just one "correct" interpretation, but many. Interpretation will vary as the personal, class, ideological, and national interests of interpreters and their audiences vary. Whatever the audience aimed at, interpretation will suggest the particular values held by it that are represented by the object under consideration. The study of the artifact is not complete until an interpretation of its significance has been offered.

The particular facts about the artifact that interpretation singles out for our attention may have come from the operations of identification, evaluation, or cultural analysis. It might be an association with some famous person or event in history; the use of some costly, rare, or novel material; some innovative technological principle embodied in construction; the superlative quality of design; the strategic character of symbolic function; the cultural changes effected by use; or the way the artifact expresses the life-style of the age or culture in which it originated. The value to which an object relates may be our love of statistical "firsts." Thus the significance of an artifact might be interpreted as the fact that it was the largest or tallest or costliest or first one of its kind. For an American audience, other relevant values to which facts about an artifact might be related are upward social mobility, American nationalism, American superiority or uniqueness, urbanization, ecology, democracy, mechanization, black power, or women's liberation. One might interpret the significance of the Model T Ford to be the pioneering application of the assembly line to mass production, its improvements on the internal combustion engine, or its provision of cheap transportation. On the other hand, its significance might be found in the fact that it was a particular instance of the general democratization

of technological benefits, or that it created a revolution in the life-style of rural America. Or its significance might be found in its effects and consequences, such as the increased mobility of the American people, the liberalized sexual ethics of the middle class, or air pollution. The balance of this paper will apply the concept of the five properties and the four operations to a specific example of seventeenth-century American furniture.

#### Application of the Model to an Early American Court Cupboard

*Identification:* Identification of this object begins with its denomination as a court cupboard, a classification based on function. A court cupboard can be defined as an open three-tiered structure of equal-size shelves for the display of plate, a form introduced in England toward the end of the sixteenth century.<sup>19</sup> Curatorship authenticates the court cupboard as genuine, and for the most part original. Simple identification yields a body of concise facts about its five properties. Some of these facts are derived from connoisseurship, some from laboratory analysis, some from documents.<sup>20</sup>

Beginning with the history of the cupboard, the artifact itself tells us its date and original ownership. On the front case below the upper drawer are the incised characters "P 1680 WF" (Fig. 3). Such initials and numerals conform to fairly widespread practice in the ornamentation of case furniture of the period. Curatorship affirms that the "1680" numerals are original and probably represent the date of construction; that the "PW" initials are original and represent the first owner, and that the "F" (J) represents a later addition. Connoisseurship provides the judgment, based on a comparison with documented examples, that the provenance is Essex County, Massachusetts. Assuming the accuracy of the family records of a modern owner and with the help of genealogical records, Irving P. Lyon concluded that the "PW" denoted Peter Wood-

<sup>19</sup> Louise Ade Boger, *The Complete Guide To Furniture Styles* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1959), p. 207; Benno M. Forman, "The Seventeenth Century Case Furniture of Essex County, Massachusetts, and Its Makers" (M.A. thesis, University of Delaware, 1968), p. 188; Peter Thornton, "Two Problems," *The Journal of the Furniture History Society* 7 (1971): 62.

<sup>20</sup> I am indebted for several points made in the following discussion to the friendly assistance of Benno M. Forman and to seminar papers written by Winterthur fellows of the classes of 1971 and 1972.



FIG. 3. Court cupboard, Salem, Mass., 1680. Detail of panel between drawers. (Winterthur 66.1261.)

bury. Benno M. Forman concluded that the "I" denotes Woodbury's son, Josiah, who inherited half of his father's house and its contents in 1704. Simple identification of the history of this court cupboard thus results in the statement that it was made in 1680 in Essex County, Massachusetts, probably in the Salem-Beverly area, for Peter Woodbury, by an unknown joiner.<sup>21</sup> Wear and tear over the years have resulted in the necessary restoration of the right rear foot, most of the knobs, and replacement of some of the applied moldings, one of the pendles, and the top; the drawer dividers and cloth lining are modern (Fig. 4).

Extended identification of the history of this court cupboard shows that the first owner, Peter Woodbury, was a resident of Beverly, Massachusetts. He was born in 1640, the eldest son of John Woodbury, who was one of the original proprietors of the Dorchester Company and a founder of Salem in 1628. Peter Woodbury became a freeman in 1668 and a sergeant of militia in 1685. He was married first to Sarah Dodge, daughter of Richard Dodge; his several children included Peter by his first wife and Josiah by his second. Part of his home is still

<sup>21</sup> Irving P. Lyon, "The Oak Furniture of Ipswich, Massachusetts," *Antiques* 33, no. 6 (June 1938): 325; Charles Levi Woodbury, *Genealogical Sketches of the Woodbury Family* (Manchester, N.H., 1904), p. 83; Forman, "Case Furniture of Essex County," p. 119. The attribution of this cupboard to Thomas Dennis cannot yet be dismissed.

extant in a structure located at what is now 82 Dodge Street in Beverly. A yeoman farmer, Woodbury owned considerable land and at his death in 1704 left an estate worth nearly a thousand pounds, which made him one of the dozen wealthiest men in Beverly. His inventory lists "one Wincut Cubard," which is valued, along with "one long Table, one bench, and two gined [joined] stooles" at four pounds. The value of the cupboard in 1704 could be estimated at around two pounds, but in 1680 it was probably worth more. At the time of Woodbury's death or that of his second wife, the cupboard appears to have passed to their son Josiah, who may have added the "P" to the right of the "W." Resident in Beverly was a joiner named Ryce Edwards who had the skills to make this court cupboard.<sup>22</sup>

Proceeding to material, inspection supported by microanalysis of wood samples ascertains that red oak was used for the framing of the case, drawer fronts, and drawer sides; sycamore for the drawer bottoms, drawer front moldings, two remaining original shelves, and back of the enclosed section. Three kinds of decorative wood were used—hard

<sup>22</sup> James Savage, *A Genealogical Dictionary of the First Settlers of New England*, 4 vols. (Baltimore: Genealogical Publishing Co., 1965), 4:635–36; Forman, "Case Furniture of Essex County," pp. 118–19; Lyon, "Oak Furniture of Ipswich," p. 325; Registrar's Object File, 66.1261, Winterthur Museum.

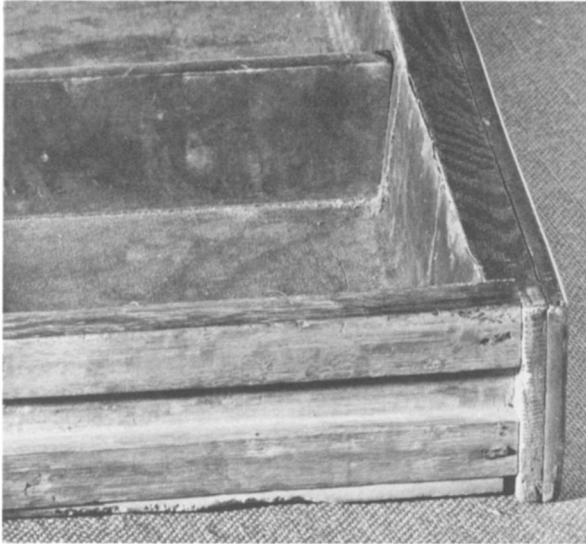


FIG. 4. Court cupboard, Salem, Mass., 1680. Detail of drawer showing construction and modern cloth lining. (Winterthur 66.1261.)

FIG. 5. Court cupboard, Salem, Mass., 1680. Detail of drawer bottom showing mill saw marks. (Winterthur 66.1261.)



maple for the turned columns and split spindles, black walnut for the applied ornament on the door, and poplar for the dated panel between the drawers. Other materials included iron nails used in the drawers (Fig. 4) and glue and sprigs, which hold on the applied half spindles.<sup>23</sup>

<sup>23</sup> Catalog card for 1680 court cupboard (66.1261), Winterthur Museum.

Regarding construction, we can see that the oak was riven; regularly spaced parallel saw marks on the sycamore indicate that it was mill-sawn (Fig. 5). The carcass was framed with mortise and tenon joints, which are pinned with wooden pegs. Panels were inserted into the frames. The sycamore boards of the drawer bottoms were fitted to each other longitudinally with a tongue-and-groove, and the drawers were side hung (Fig. 4). Many of the deco-

rative elements are of the split-spindle type made by turning on the lathe. The applied moldings and spindles were originally attached to the surface with glue. The drawer sides were nailed to the drawer fronts rather than dovetailed. Extended identification of construction indicates that oak could be easily riven but was hard to saw. Riving was a much older technique than mill sawing, although there was more mill sawing in New England than in England.<sup>24</sup>

Extended identification of the court cupboard form indicates that the form was found in many countries of western Europe during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.<sup>25</sup> The New England court cupboard was derived from the English court cupboard, a furniture form representing the last phase of the medieval plate cupboard, which functioned as a serving table with open shelves.<sup>26</sup> As the English upper classes turned from the medieval hall in favor of the new dining parlors, where they could take their meals apart from the servants, the plate cupboard underwent a change, becoming a piece of wall furniture designed for these new rooms. Thus the new design of plate cupboards—now called court cupboards—became fashionable around the mid-sixteenth century. Although the new court cupboard, like the plate cupboard, started with open shelves (Fig. 6), some cupboards were fitted with enclosed areas by the middle of the sixteenth century. The court cupboard enjoyed its greatest popularity in the seventeenth century and declined in fashion toward the end of the century, its functions being replaced early in the eighteenth century by the corner cupboard, the long



FIG. 6. Court cupboard. England, early seventeenth century. (Victoria and Albert Museum.)

side table or sideboard table, and the mantle tree. The eighteenth-century court cupboard was, according to Ralph Fastnedge, “the unfashionable product of the country joiner.”<sup>27</sup>

In the American colonies seventeenth-century probate records note eighty-one examples of court cupboards in New England, quite a number in the South, and none in New York.<sup>28</sup> The largest number of surviving examples, about fifty, are from New England and particularly from Essex County. A few Southern examples are known, but none from the Middle Colonies have been identified. In the typical New England form, the enclosed cabinet is above; in the only southern one, it is below. The examples surviving in American museums and

<sup>24</sup> Benno M. Forman, “Mill Sawing in Seventeenth Century Massachusetts,” *Old Time New England* 60, no. 4 (Spring 1970): 110–30; Forman, “Continental Furniture Craftsmen in London: 1511–1625,” *The Journal of the Furniture History Society* 7 (1971): 94–120.

<sup>25</sup> For German examples of mid-sixteenth-century court cupboards see the painting *The Marriage at Cana* by Ludger Tom Ring the Younger in Otto von Falke, *Deutsche Möbel des Mittelalters und der Renaissance* (Stuttgart: Verlag Julius Hoffmann, 1924), pp. 28–29. For a French example of a mid-seventeenth-century court cupboard see Jean Dubreuil, *La Perspective Pratique . . . Premier Partie* (2nd ed.; Paris: Chez François L’Anglois, 1651), p. 100. Some furniture historians believe that the English court cupboard is related to the Continental *dressoir* and the French *armoires*.

<sup>26</sup> R. W. Symonds, “The Evolution of the Cupboard,” *Connoisseur* 112, no. 490 (Dec. 1943): 95; L. G. G. Ramsey, “Foreword,” *The Connoisseur Period Guides: The Stuart Period, 1603–1714*, ed. Ralph Edwards and L. G. G. Ramsey (New York: Reynal & Co., 1957), p. 9.

<sup>27</sup> Symonds, “Evolution of the Cupboard,” p. 95; Symonds, “The Dying Parlor and Its Furniture,” *Connoisseur* 113, no. 491 (Mar. 1944): 15, 17; Boger, *Complete Guide to Furniture Styles*, p. 207; Ralph Fastnedge, “Furniture,” in *The Connoisseur Period Guides: The Stuart Period, 1603–1714*, p. 35; Luke V. Lockwood, *Colonial Furniture in America* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1901), p. 85; Thornton, “Two Problems,” p. 61; Forman, “Case Furniture of Essex County,” *passim*.

<sup>28</sup> Irving W. Lyon, *Colonial Furniture in New England* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1892), p. 35; Lockwood, *Colonial Furniture*, pp. 85–86. It should be noted that very few New York probate records survive.

private collections all seem to indicate a date of construction during or after the last quarter of the seventeenth century.<sup>29</sup>

The 1680 court cupboard is designed as a rectangular, open structure consisting of three shelves separated by corner supports that form two cases: an upper case with a recessed trapezoidal cabinet between the top shelf and the middle shelf; and a lower case fitted with two long drawers just below the middle shelf. The top and bottom shelves are completely open. The upper case and the two drawers form a three-sided overhang (two sides and rear). The design is clearly architectural in such elements as the base, column supports, cornice effect, overhang, and some of the ornament.

The style of the case is late medieval, the latest phase of the evolving medieval plate cupboard. On this basic medieval form, was superimposed a vocabulary of Anglo-Dutch mannerist ornament that characterized much Elizabethan-Tudor and early Jacobean furniture. Examples include the distortion of classical proportions, the transformation of classical columnar supports into bulbous or vase-like balusters, the use of split spindles to simulate columns that support nothing, and the arches with carrot-shaped pendant drops that express a delight in manipulating gravity-defying plastic form (Fig. 7).<sup>30</sup> By no means can this court cupboard be considered part of the New England plain style, rather it was self-conscious emulation of the fashion then up-to-date among the rural yeoman class in England.

Six types of ornament give the cupboard a rich decorative effect: the architectural element of the cornice on three sides of the top shelf; the overhang of the central shelf on both sides and rear; the application of moldings, split spindles, and bosses in geometrical patterns; the turning of the vertical supporting members; the use of black paint to simulate ebony on the decorative columns, pendants, split spindles, and some of the moldings; and the use of contrasting woods. The recessed cabinet surfaces are decorated with applied moldings that form double-arched panels with keystone headings; long, central, carrot-shaped drops; and blanking



FIG. 7. Court cupboard, Salem, Mass., 1680. Detail of side panel on cabinet. (Winterthur 66.1261.)

bosses. There is none of the carving that marks somewhat earlier case furniture (Figs. 8, 9).

Extended identification of the ornament indicates that applied moldings and split spindles in geometrical patterns were introduced into English furniture late in the sixteenth century, were in wide use in England by the middle of the seventeenth century, and appeared on New England court cupboards in the last quarter of the century (Figs. 10, 11), replacing the earlier preference for ornament carved in low relief and occasional inlay (Figs. 8, 9).<sup>31</sup> This new mannerist decoration, such as the turned half-pendants that are broader at the top and taper towards the bottom, came into the Anglo-American tradition from the Flemish Netherlands. The bulbous vase-shaped balusters, borrowed by the English from the Dutch in the sixteenth century, were used as supports on tables and bedsteads as well as court cupboards. And the use of black paint on bosses, spindles, and columns may be an adaptation of the German imitation of southern European use of ebony. By the time of the settlement of Massachusetts Bay Colony in the 1630s, these and other Renaissance motifs were well known to craftsmen in the American colonies

<sup>29</sup> Forman, "Case Furniture of Essex County," p. 118.

<sup>30</sup> Margaretta Lovell, "Background of the Court Cupboard in Seventeenth Century America" (seminar report for History 802, University of Delaware, 1971); Deborah (Dependahl) Waters, "The 1680 Court Cupboard" (seminar report for History 802, University of Delaware, 1971).

<sup>31</sup> Helen Park, "The Seventeenth Century Furniture of Essex County and Its Makers," *Antiques* 78, no. 4 (Oct. 1960): 355; Forman, "Case Furniture of Essex County," pp. 76, 89-90.



FIG. 8. Parmenter court cupboard, 1640–60. (Wadsworth Atheneum.)



FIG. 9. Court cupboard, probably Virginia, 1640–60. (Wadsworth Atheneum.)

and, indeed, were used in the colonies after they were outmoded in Europe.<sup>32</sup>

*Evaluation:* An evaluation of the 1680 court cupboard begins with a comparison of court cupboards in general with other American furniture forms of the period. Four conclusions can be formed. First, the court cupboard was one of the largest, most intricate, most profusely ornamented, and most sophisticated pieces of furniture made at this time. Second, it was the most expensive American-made furniture form of the period.<sup>33</sup> Third, in its vocabulary of ornament, the court cupboard might well have been “the most impressive manifestation of Renaissance ideas (however distorted) that found its way into seventeenth-century New England parlors.” Fourth, no other American furniture forms of this date show a more developed sense of the early Jacobean style. Therefore, by Essex County standards of 1680, the 1680 court cupboard can be considered avant-garde. As a result the 1680 court cupboard and its fellows were the most important pieces of seventeenth-century furniture made in New England.

Compared to other court cupboards of the same quarter century (Figs. 9, 10, 11), the 1680 court cupboard stands out as one of the largest, most imposing, and most handsomely designed and ornamented of all these examples, with perhaps the finest workmanship. The 1680 court cupboard does share a number of decorative details with other Essex County court cupboards and chests of the same date. Three so closely resemble it in their overhanging central shelves with pendants that Irving P. Lyon concluded that they all “came from the same hand.” Richard H. Randall calls attention to three others (Fig. 10) that closely resemble it in having similar balusters and ball feet and a similar arrangement of molded panels and split spindles. One other court cupboard and a chest from Essex County have been found with exactly identical paneled door designs.<sup>34</sup> Indeed, there seems to

<sup>32</sup> Frederick S. Robinson, *English Furniture* (London: Methuen & Co., 1905), p. 91; Joseph Aronson, *The Encyclopedia of Furniture* (New York: Crown Publishers, 1965), p. 187; Lockwood, *Colonial Furniture*, p. 96; Helen Comstock, *American Furniture* (New York: Viking Press, 1962), p. 13.

<sup>33</sup> Bed “furniture,” often consisting of important fabrics, could be worth five times as much as a court cupboard Lovell, “Background of the Court Cupboard,” p. 2.

<sup>34</sup> Lyon, “Oak Furniture of Ipswich,” pp. 322–23; Richard H. Randall, Jr., *American Furniture in the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston* (Boston: Museum of Fine Arts, 1965), p. 29.



FIG. 10. Thomas Dennis (attributed), court cupboard. Ipswich, Mass., 1684. H.  $53\frac{5}{8}$ " , W.  $48\frac{1}{2}$ " , D.  $20\frac{3}{8}$ " . (Winterthur 57-542.)





FIG. 11. Court cupboard, Essex County (Ipswich-Beverly area), Mass., 1680-90. H.  $55\frac{1}{2}$ "", W.  $49\frac{1}{8}$ "", D.  $19\frac{7}{8}$ ". (Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Bequest of Charles Hitchcock Tyler.)

have been a school of Essex County case furniture utilizing applied ornament in the last quarter of the seventeenth century.

All the court cupboards show a strong family resemblance to somewhat earlier English work. Compared to similar pieces made in western Europe, the 1680 cupboard is somewhat provincial, less sophisticated than work done in Antwerp one hundred years earlier, in Amsterdam fifty years earlier, or London twenty-five years earlier. Yet the American forms exhibit some divergences from European pieces. The overhang, which adds a dramatic shift of planes to the Essex County court cupboard, has not yet been found in English examples.<sup>35</sup>

*Cultural Analysis:* Cultural analysis of the 1680 court cupboard focuses on its functions, five of which can be identified. Randle Holme, in his *Academy of Armory* of 1688, lists the court cupboard as among those “things necessary for and belonging to a dining Room.” Inventories also place it in the other rooms, halls, parlors, and chambers where eating took place. Its utility function was threefold—to provide surfaces for the display of decorative eating and drinking vessels; to act as a service table; and to provide storage space. George Chapman’s comedy of 1611, *May Day*, suggests what some of the vessels displayed might be. “And so for the feast, you have your court cupboards planted with flagons, cans, cups, beakers, bowls, goblets, basins, and ewers.” Nicholas Davison’s inventory, Charlestown, Massachusetts, 1664–65, mentions “A Court Cupboard with Cupboard Cloath, glases and Earthenware.”<sup>36</sup> Indeed the court cupboard assumes the possession of a number of household articles worthy of display. The storage function, for utensils, not food, was provided by the enclosed area and the two drawers, which were probably designed to contain tablecloths and napkins. Some of the enclosed storage spaces were fitted with locks to prevent theft (Figs. 2, 8, 10).

In addition to its utility function, the court cupboard served as a “vehicle of delight.”<sup>37</sup> The power and beauty of its design, the variety and imaginative richness of its ornament, and the textures of

its woods all made it an object that “demands to be experienced aesthetically.”<sup>38</sup> Third, the court cupboard had an important communication function in its statement of status. In England, many late-Tudor and Jacobean court cupboards were made of walnut and richly carved and inlaid “as befitted ceremonial pieces.” In New England inventories these forms were found only among the better sort—magistrates, clergy, merchants, large landowners, and so on. Court cupboards were expensive, large, highly ornamental, stylish, quite likely the most striking object in a room, and certainly the most important piece of case furniture that a New Englander could own. They connoted wealth, sophistication, luxury, business success, possibly to the Puritan even election to salvation. They did not represent an efficient utilization of space—the trapezoidal enclosed area limited storage—and one furniture historian has referred to the court cupboard as “that rare, expensive, and virtually useless piece of vanity furniture.” Wallace Nutting suggested that “people aspired to own a court cupboard as a token of assured position in society.” Charles Montgomery liked to call the court cupboard “the Cadillac of the seventeenth century.” To Peter Woodbury’s guests, the court cupboard said, “This is what I, Peter Woodbury, have achieved.”<sup>39</sup>

Beyond its communication of status, the court cupboard served, through its style and ornament, as a vehicle of expression of the early Jacobean aesthetic and ethos with its special combination of late-medieval forms and Renaissance-mannerist ornament. “It spoke of contemporary English and Continental decorative developments as no other artifact of its date did or could.”<sup>40</sup>

Finally, the court cupboard in Essex County may well have served as a symbol of the New Englander’s participation in the English heritage, a substantial affirmation of ties with English culture and society at its middle class best that were not broken but were merely transplanted. Thus it served as a means of transforming the impersonal new environment of New England’s “howling wilderness”

<sup>35</sup> Panofsky, *Meaning in the Visual Arts*, p. 39.

<sup>36</sup> Forman, conversations with author.

<sup>37</sup> Fastnedge, “Furniture,” p. 35; Symonds, “Dyning Parlor,” p. 16; Lyon, *Colonial Furniture of New England*, pp. 35, 38, 42, 44.

<sup>38</sup> Theodore Meyer Greene, *The Arts and the Art of Criticism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1940), p. 7.

<sup>39</sup> Fastnedge, “Furniture,” p. 35; Lyon, *Colonial Furniture*, pp. 35, 42; Forman, “Case Furniture of Essex County,” p. 74; Wallace Nutting, *Furniture Treasury*, 2 vols. (Framingham, Mass.: Old American Co., 1928), 1:190; Montgomery, lecture on the seventeenth century for Art History 801, University of Delaware.

<sup>40</sup> Lovell, “Background of the Court Cupboard.”

into a personal setting of rich cultural meaning that offered reinforcement and security.

Cultural analysis of the 1680 court cupboard can be extended in several ways by a sampling operation. Since drawer construction is a key variable in identifying the provenance, maker, and possibly even the dating of case pieces, the 1680 court cupboard might be classified through a typology based on this construction feature.<sup>41</sup> In this example the fifteen pieces of seventeenth-century New England case furniture in the Winterthur collection are used as a sample of New England case furniture of the period. Of the seven or eight possible characteristics that might be used in analyzing drawer construction, two important ones are how the sides of the drawer are joined to the front and rear. The joinery techniques involved can be described and graphed in terms of nine variables (Tables 1, 2).

The representation of drawer construction leads to the hypothesis, duly qualified by the small size of the sample and the limited number of variables selected, that the drawer construction of the 1680 court cupboard (rabbeted-overlap) represents one of the two most common forms used in seventeenth-century New England case furniture. Since all court cupboards did not utilize exactly the same techniques of drawer construction (the three in the sample fall into three different categories, with the single cupboard in a fourth), the analysis suggests a considerable lack of standardization in craft practice, although all of the five examples positively identified as of Essex County (including Salem) provenance fall into two of the nine categories, i.e. either the rabbeted-overlap or the rabbeted-rabbeted (which together make up 59 percent of the total). The rabbeting technique was the one preferred during that period since drawer sides in 86 percent of the sample were joined to the front by rabbeting rather than by dovetailing.

A sample could also be used to form a chronology of court cupboards, which might yield interesting conclusions about changes and priorities in the selection of woods, construction techniques, design, and size, and might identify regional preferences of construction. With a large enough sample of court cupboards and enough identifying data, a

statistical analysis could produce extremely useful correlations between court cupboard ownership and income, occupation, religious affiliation, rural-urban residence, and geographical location.

Product analysis of the 1680 court cupboard seeks to account for its material, construction, design,

Table 1: Variants of Joining Drawer Sides to Drawer Front and Rear in Seventeenth-Century New England Case Furniture

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*Variant AB: How the sides of the drawer are joined to the front*

- a. rabbeted (by letting a rabbet into the front, and the side let into the rabbet and nailed).
- b. rabbeted from higher (same as above but with the front an inch or two higher than the sides or rear).
- c. 1 dovetail (the use of one large dovetail, wherein the wedge-shaped tenon is on the side and the mortise is cut into the end of the front).

*Variant AC: How the sides of the drawer are joined to the rear*

- a. rabbeted (the side can be rabbeted into the rear).
  - b. overlap (the side to overlap the rear, butted and nailed).
  - c. overlapped (the side to be overlapped by the rear, butted and nailed).
- 

and function by exploring how each of these was conditioned by its culture. Essex County, Massachusetts, in the late seventeenth century, can be described as a homogeneous, English, yeoman, Puritan culture rooted in the life-style of provincial, rural England, perhaps especially of East Anglia. Conservative reliance on tradition was the rule, innovation the exception. The plans of its towns, the style of its architecture and painting, the spirit of its laws, the organization of its family life, its language, literature, and religion expressed a conscious continuity with what had been known in the home country. What had been known in rural England was strongly marked by late medieval traditions and forms surviving in Tudor-Jacobean design.

In the case of the material of the court cupboard, the choice of oak for the predominant wood resulted chiefly from the Essex County joiner's reliance on English traditional preference for oak, the choice of red oak, from its local abundance. Red oak was largely clear of knots and easy to work when green. The construction techniques of riving, framing and pinning, joining by mortise and tenon, and turning were all traditional techniques

<sup>41</sup> This sample and the analysis of drawer construction that follows are based on Robert Trent, "Quantitative Analysis of Seventeenth-Century Pre-William and Mary American Drawer Construction" (seminar report for History 802, University of Delaware, 1972).

brought to New England by emigrating craftsmen. The greater reliance on mill-sawing was due to the limited labor supply, the presence of abundant water power and forests, and a tolerance for techno-

logical advance. The use of small rectangular panels, which appear on the 1680 court cupboard, was particularly characteristic of East Anglian case construction. The joiner's use of the mortise and

Table 2: Correlation of Fifteen Seventeenth-Century New England Case Pieces in the Winterthur Collection with Nine Possible Types of Drawer Construction

|                          |               |               |                     |
|--------------------------|---------------|---------------|---------------------|
|                          | <b>B</b>      |               |                     |
| rabbeted                 | 4<br>examples | 5<br>examples | 2<br>examples       |
| rabbeted<br>front higher | 1<br>example  |               | 1<br>example        |
| 1 dovetail               | 1<br>example  |               | 1<br>example        |
| <b>A</b>                 | rabbeted      | overlap       | overlapped <b>C</b> |

Summary

|                                  |         |
|----------------------------------|---------|
| rabbeted-rabbeted                | 26.66%  |
| rabbeted-overlap                 | 33.33%  |
| rabbeted-overlapped              | 13.33%  |
| rabbeted front higher-rabbeted   | 6.67%   |
| rabbeted front higher-overlap    | 0       |
| rabbeted front higher-overlapped | 6.67%   |
| 1 dovetail-rabbeted              | 6.67%   |
| 1 dovetail-overlap               | 0       |
| 1 dovetail-overlapped            | 6.67%   |
|                                  | 100.00% |

Note: The axis AB indicates how the drawer is let into the front, while the AC axis indicates how the sides are joined to the rear.

tenon, which goes back to the later Middle Ages, had, by the late 1600s, been supplanted to a great extent in London by the cabinetmaker's technique of dovetailing, but mortise and tenon construction was still very much used in rural England. There were probably thirty joiners and one hundred carpenters working in Essex County who could use these rural techniques of construction. In design, the choice of the court cupboard form, its dimensions, its style and ornament were all imitative of English forms known by the yeoman class emigrating from England. Likewise the court cupboard continued to fulfill traditional English functions.

A content analysis of the 1680 court cupboard is a selection from the total number of statements we can make correlating what we know about its history with what we know about its material, construction, design, and function. Some statements tell us about the maker. In 1680 in Essex County there was at least one joiner capable of making this complex and expensive example of Jacobean case furniture. The high quality of workmanship indicates a well-trained craftsman with good tools and a thorough knowledge of joinery and either skill in turning or access to a turner. Other statements tell us about the owner. In 1680 in Essex County there was at least one man, Peter Woodbury, who wanted to own this sophisticated, expensive example of Jacobean case furniture designed in the latest fashion (for Essex County), a furniture form generally recognized as a status symbol. He was one of the wealthiest men in his community, and this furniture form was one of the costliest items in his inventory. The owner of an estate of £1,000 in Essex County in 1680 could own this court cupboard; in England he might not have been able to do so. Thus, the court cupboard reflects some of the aspects of social mobility usually attributed to the American experience.

Still other statements of content give evidence of the culture. The parallel saw marks on the sycamore indicate that it was mill-sawn, which predicates the existence of a sawmill in the region. The existence of an economically substantial patron ordering a piece of vanity furniture from a highly trained craftsman suggests a relatively high standard of living in late seventeenth-century Essex County. This piece of furniture (of which there are several other very similar examples from the same county) presents a combination of traditional and innovative features—traditional material and methods of construction, innovative features in the use

of sycamore, mill sawing, and the overhang. Judged in terms of other extant furniture forms of Essex County of this date, as far as current research has gone, the 1680 court cupboard is avant-garde. What was avant-garde for the tastemakers of Essex County in 1680 was a mixture of late medieval elements that did not yet reflect the baroque influences coming into popularity in contemporary England. Relative to what English yeoman farmers were buying and owning, this piece was up to date; relative to what was avant-garde in England and the continent, it was somewhat dated.

*Interpretation:* Interpretation of the significance of the 1680 cupboard will be as various as the interests and preoccupations of those who look at it. For persons who feel that statistics and money values are particularly revealing, the significance of this case piece might lie in the fact that it is the largest, heaviest, and most expensive item of furniture to be found in a seventeenth-century New England home. For persons interested in the image of New England Puritanism, the importance of this court cupboard could lie in its forceful revelation that, however plain the exterior of the yeoman house and the meetinghouse might have been, the interior of the home could be furnished with visually exciting and even sensuous forms that indicate a lively interest in what was fashionable in England. These Puritans of Essex County definitely did not reject the "vanities" and "conceits" of their homeland, but obviously enjoyed and emulated the heavy opulence and fancifulness of the Jacobean aesthetic. From the standpoint of style, the court cupboard represented more of a transition from medieval to renaissance usages than Puritan town planning, architecture, painting, education, or family organization of the same date. Persons interested in the "sea change" brought by the voyage across the Atlantic might find the meaning of this furniture form in the fact that the man who could afford it in Essex County would probably not have been able to afford it in East Anglia.

For students of seventeenth-century New England culture, the relevance of the cupboard might lie in the fact that, while it definitely includes some innovative features, its material, construction, design, and function are overwhelmingly conservative and represent an effort not so much to adapt to the novelties of the New World experience as to affirm familiar and prestigious Old World forms. It further suggests an ethos marked by transition from predominantly late medieval elements to Renais-

sance ones, a transition from a first- and second-generation preference for carved ornament to a third-generation preference for applied ornament, and an elite consumer's market for vanity furniture serving as status symbols. From the standpoint of frontier influence and colonial-provincial attitudes in the seventeenth century, this elaborate and finely wrought court cupboard vividly demonstrates how far its culture was from the subsistence level and what a distance the third generation, in Essex County, had moved itself psychologically from "the howling wilderness" that we are sometimes led to believe was its inescapable environment.

All or parts of the approach utilized above in

analyzing a 1680 court cupboard should be applicable to other artifacts. Furthermore, it is hoped that the reasons advanced for the need of a model for artifact study, the model presented above, and its application to the cupboard will contribute to the development of a more systematic study of material culture. Interest in such study is extensive and growing, the related disciplines contributing to this study are numerous and substantial, the literature bearing on the field is extensive, and the rewards of such study are promising. Certainly the study of material culture deserves to take its place among other humanistic disciplines.