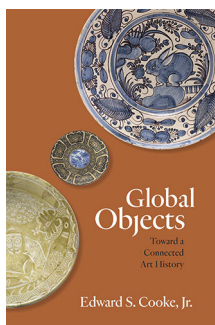


EDWARD S. COOKE, JR., *GLOBAL OBJECTS. TOWARD A CONNECTED ART HISTORY*

Princeton: Princeton University Press 2022, 327 pages with 215 color ill., ISBN 978-0-69118-473-9.



Reviewed by
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Cooke provides a stimulating framework of global art in his new book as an alternative to the dominant art historical cannon that champions painting, sculpture, and architecture. Instead, in *Global Objects. Toward a Connected Art History*, Cooke inspects art objects from diverse geographies anachronistically to reveal how interactions in human history materialize in object production. The author analyzes the making, movement, and meaning of art objects mainly from the domestic sphere, shifting focus away from categories of time, space, and medium into nuances of objecthood. Cooke's framework is inherently decolonial and epistemological, as it refuses to use the spatiotemporal categories or the vision-centered approach of Western art history. Challenging the binaries of Western versus Other and "high" versus "low" art in this book, Cooke presents a revisionist approach to global material culture that frames art objects as embodiments of social interactions across space and time.

Published by Princeton University Press, *Global Objects* is catered to an audience greater than art historians and makes material culture studies digestible to individuals who seek to understand objects beyond the traditional fields of Western art history. The

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book is adorned with figures of 215 objects dating from antiquity to the twentieth century that are attributed across the globe. The diversity of the enticing objects pictured, woven throughout the text, attests that Cooke's book acts in defiance not only of the traditional categories of art history but also of the arbitrary distinction between fine art versus everyday objects in the field. Included in the book is a detailed glossary that describes technical words such as "fritware" (p. 272) and "weft" (p. 276) that enhances the reading experience of the book's non-specialist audience. What is lacking, however, is a comprehensive bibliography, making Cooke's references only accessible through the notes section that is included as a separate chapter at the end.

Global Objects is divided into an introduction, seven chapters, and a conclusion, followed by acknowledgments, a glossary, a notes section, an index, and photography credits. In the introduction, Cooke brings attention to the hegemony of easel painting in Western art history based on values of authorship and visuality that consequentially relegate global objects, made mostly anonymously and for functionality, outside of art museums into those of natural history and anthropology (p. 9). It is here that Cooke mentions his aim to combat the "European misunderstanding of art", which he defines as the prioritization of "the cerebral over the manual, the head over the body, the visual over the haptic and other senses, and the aesthetically autonomous over the socially functional" (p. 9). Presenting functional objects as "active, symbolic agents" (p. 15), Cooke foreshadows that he will argue for a reciprocal relationship between the human and material components of the network of global object production and circulation. In his approach to objecthood, Cooke seems to draw on Bruno Latour's actor-network theory (p. 156) that equates the role of humans to those of objects and ideas in establishing social networks.¹ Elaborating on Latour's theory, Cooke conceives objects to be performances that reflect the "shared values and experience of its maker and user" rather than the passive commodities or "idealized academic archetypes" (p. 57) that they are framed to be in traditional Western scholarship.

The seven chapters of the book are divided into three main sections, tracing the illustrated objects from their (1) making to (2) movement to (3) meaning. The section on making is divided into the chapters "Materials" and "Realization", both of which include subsections of mediums: ceramics, textiles, base metals, and wood. Cooke strongly asserts in his introduction that medium-focused art historians tend to miss the trans material aspect of art production, and accordingly, within these subsections, he notes instances in which processes used in the realization of different mediums influence each other. These subsections on media prove particularly useful in his material-centered approach, as the exceptionally detailed information about the properties of raw materials and how

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Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social. An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory*, New York 2005.

they are fabricated ground the book in the physicality of art. In “Materials”, Cooke places emphasis on raw materials, highlighting that elements have monetary value along finished goods within exchange economies and that knowledge regarding raw materials is acquired experientially instead of scientifically. In “Realization”, the author details the different ways that raw materials are fabricated to become finished objects, framing the process of production as a collective one that is influenced by the properties of the material and “embodies the shared values and experience of maker and user” (p. 57).

The following section on movement is divided into chapters “Circulation and Interchange” and “Function”. In “Circulation and Interchange”, Cooke urges scholars to understand objects within multilayered exchange systems beyond the dichotomies of center and periphery, East and West, or colonized and colonizer. Portable objects and their mobile artists are given agency in these interchanges as part of the same global network, which allows us to combat the Eurocentric notion of linear artistic progress that only happens in centers of production through the artist genius. “Function” aims to topple the modernist idea of “form follows function”, which Cooke disputes as an elitist framework championing the designer over the user (p. 149). The chapter emphasizes that values and meanings of objects are attributed in systems of interchange that can be “both relation and situational” (p. 150), equating the agency to the user to the maker.

Lastly, the section on meaning is composed of three chapters: “Memory and Gift”, “Appearance”, and “Touch”. “Memory and Gift” frames objects as “receptacles of lived experience” and memory, shifting our understanding from “a synchronic [...] to a diachronic one” (p. 183). Rather than viewing art as passive commodities activated by humans, Cooke regards processes of meaning acquisition in connection to material properties and object movement. In “Appearance”, the visual qualities of objects that Cooke aims to deemphasize in his theoretical framework are mentioned, only to argue that aesthetics negotiate initial encounters that should be further understood within broader frameworks of communicating interchanges. Lastly, the chapter on “Touch” concludes with a remarkable epistemological critique of art historians like Alois Riegl, Heinrich Wölfflin, and Erwin Panofsky, “who equated the history of art with a history of vision” (p. 254). Cooke reinforces a haptic approach in which he regards the finished work as one to be understood through the connection of “the hand and the mind” (p. 236), aiming to dismantle what has been termed “empire of sight” by Susan Stewart.²

The notion of vision as the ultimate sense is a “white, European and Christian perspective that connects race, geography, and even religion to visual literacy and considers reliance on tactility to be an

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Susan Stewart, “Prologue. From the Museum of Touch”, in: *Material Memories. Design and Evocation*, Oxford 1999, 28.

indication of inferior race, culture, or belief system” (p. 254). Deeming aesthetics the fundamental notion of art and the eye to be its distinguishing sense, the empire of sight creates a hierarchy where Western works made solely for the sake of beauty are valued over functional objects. This dichotomy between what has been termed “universal beauty” and “utilitarian function” by Sally Price views its two sides as “competitive and incompatible”,³ which in turn separates the category of Western art from global objects. Cooke’s preeminence of tactility over vision in his methodology breaks the arbitrary boundary between art and object, and it is therefore consequentially decolonial, working to promote a global art history. The book is as influential in the field of visual culture studies as it is in art history, questioning *how* we see as well as *what* we see.

Cooke’s methodology embodies principles of Alfred Gell’s anthropology of art, which he references in the chapters “Memory and Gift” (pp. 208–209) and “Appearance” (p. 210). As Gell suggests, applying a vision-based approach to non-Western art colonizes global art history into the Western hegemony of aesthetic sensitivity,⁴ which Cooke challenges with his haptic approach in *Global Objects*. In line with Gell, Cooke seeks the subject matter of global art in social relationships and the external world in which objects are produced, used, and circulated rather than the aesthetic sensitivity of Western art theory. The conclusion to be drawn from this book is that artists are not the ultimate creators of works of art, but rather objects have agencies of their own that define their circumstances, created through their relationship with society and environment, use and display, and makers and users. In his concluding chapter, Cooke critiques the passivity assigned to objects in visual analysis (p. 256) and the limitations forced upon scholarship through arbitrary classification systems of Western art history (p. 259). The author proclaims that the shortcomings of applying Western theoretical principles to global objects can be overcome with a “theoretical experimentalism” that ponders on a “horizontal history of the transregional world” (p. 263). Equating the role of the artist to the object to the user and that of the hand and the eye, Cooke’s publication *Global Objects. Toward a Connected Art History* presents a necessary methodological revision to material culture studies in the post-colonial era.

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Sally Price, *Primitive Art in Civilized Places*, Chicago 1989, 93.

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Alfred Gell, *Art and Agency. An Anthropological Theory*, New York 1998, 3.