

Material Culture - Nine Modes of Interpretation

There may be situations where the Museum exhibits objects rather than visual art. When this situation arises, we will do some work with material culture - in the meantime, the handout on material culture will show you how to modify your looking.

Material Culture - the products of human activity determined by the habits (culture) acquired by man as a member of society.

1. Explains why things were made.
2. Explains the forms things took.
3. Explains the need things served: social, functional, symbolic, and aesthetic.

Nine Models of Interpretation

1. Art Historical - evaluation of art by material cultural means.
2. Symbolic - the role held by an object in society.
3. Cultural - the development of characteristics of an object which can be related to particular cultures.
4. Environmental - the role of the physical environment on objects.
5. Functionalist - the way an object is used.
6. Structuralist - how an object was physically made.
7. Behaviorist - the interaction of the object and behavior patterns of society.
8. Community - the interaction of the object and society which forms/reflects a common viewpoint/character.
9. Social Historical - the story of the object or its provenance



John Steuart Curry
Our Good Earth, ca 1939
Lithograph
BMA , 1992.123

Our Good Earth exemplifies Regionalism. The Museum owns an original drawing (donated by Don Lambert of Topeka) and lithograph (part of a gift from the Budge family). This image is also featured as a mural in the Agriculture School at the Univ. of Wisconsin and was used as part of the advertising campaign to sell war bonds during WWII - the Museum has the poster and pamphlet cover. It was designed to attract the American farmer. Within the picture, the farmer stands for strength, the Protestant work ethic, family values, and the American bread basket and plenty. Curry was the son of a farmer and viewed the American farmer as a hero. This work takes in iconography from the western Catholic tradition (medieval and renaissance art) with a central figure flanked on either side.

As a work of Regionalist art, *Our Good Earth* reflects the American political scene of the 1930s. It glorifies America's agrarian roots, and even offers a visionary image - Kansas of the dustbowl era would not have been so fertile. Regionalist art reflected a wider-spread sense of American pride and American fear. Industrialization and xenophobia (fear of outsiders experienced in the period leading up to WWII) engendered a strong feeling of nostalgia for America's agrarian past -- better days. In addition, it reflects the American government's campaign for family solidarity - the family was the object of intense scrutiny by social scientists in the 1920s and was found wanting. Industrialization and urbanization robbed the family of its traditional role and change from the family unit from self-sufficient to consumer of services.

Of special interest are the three stalks of wheat held in the farmer's hand. This iconography seems to come from Michelangelo's David, who clasps a sling shot as a weapon to slay Goliath. One interpretation may be that wheat is our weapon (food). A second believes that the three stalks of wheat stand for the triumvirate of Regionalism - Wood, Benton and Curry - and may refer to the use of their work by the American government as a propagandistic weapon.

You can use the above models when looking at art. For instance, Curry's "Our Good Earth" might be interpreted as follows: The work was used as a poster to sell war bonds (Behaviorist) and as a form of propaganda (Functionalist). The farmer represented the strong Protestant work ethic being touted by the American government of the time (Community). He symbolizes strength and family values (Symbolic). It is a work in the Regionalist style, impacted by the landscape of the Mid-west (Cultural and Environmental).