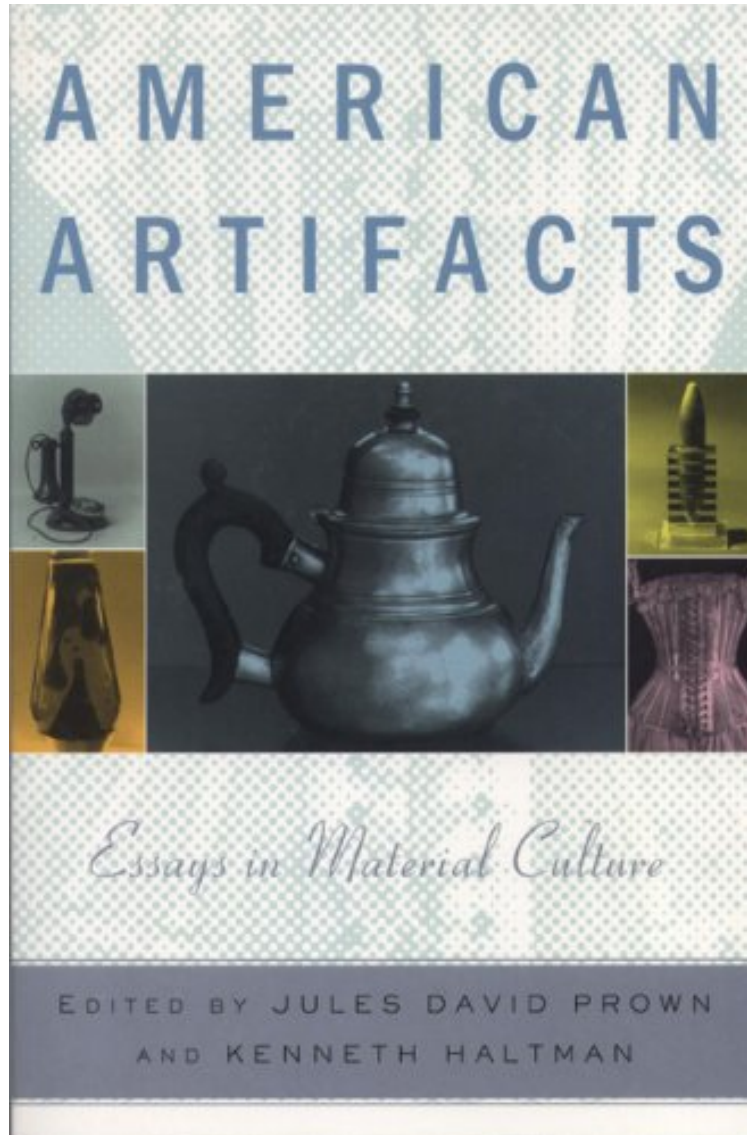


## American Artifacts: Essays in Material Culture

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**From Brand: Michigan State University Press : American Artifacts: Essays in Material Culture** before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised American Artifacts: Essays in Material Culture:

0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. FascinatingBy Stephanie L. ThompsonI bought this book to help with a course I am creating. The essays are quite interesting. If you have any interest at all in material culture, this is a fascinating and highly readable text. I would also recommend it to anyone looking for a good text to use for students in

an undergraduate or even a graduate level course.<sup>3</sup> of 3 people found the following review helpful. An excellent textbook-by-example in the material aspects of social history By Michael K. Smith Basically, "material culture" refers to stuff. Mostly ordinary, everyday stuff. An "artifact" is anything made or modified by humans, which means every work of art is an artifact, but not all artifacts are art. Prown is Emeritus Professor of Art History at Yale, so he's a very big gun indeed, and although he took over the university's material culture course as a stop-gap when the previous professor died, he has become so identified with the field now that his process of examining, analyzing, and interpreting everyday things has become known as "Prownian analysis." This collection presents a dozen essays by Prown's former students (plus a short theoretical chapter by Prown himself), the best of some hundreds, and each of them follows the same system, more or less, of describing an artifact in great detail, working out why it was made that way (the predecessor designs, the creator's intentions, artistic vs. practical aspects), what its purpose was, how it fits into the context of human society, how it "signifies," the examiner's emotional responses, and other points that the inexperienced viewer probably would never have thought of. But this is all of great interest to the social historian. And the selection of artifacts considered is very wide: A Victorian cellerette or wine cooler, with remarkable mourning imagery. A 1923 model candlestick telephone. An Amish quilt. A woman's corset from the 1880s. An iron footbridge located in a public park near the Yale campus. A tortoiseshell locket from the Gilded Age. A hand-cranked kitchen food mill from the 1920s. A novelty Lucite table lighter from c.1985. A lava lamp, very like the one I used to have in the dorm. No great art, no oils or sculptures, just ordinary items that almost any individual or family might have owned -- and that's the point. Works we create as individual pieces are consciously different in their intent from items manufactured in some quantity for general consumption. And by studying a souvenir doll from an amusement park, or a carved Federal doorway, or a Winchester '73 rifle, or a Polaroid camera, or a cheap pair of drugstore sunglasses, or even a steam locomotive, you can get a better grasp on the society, the social context, in which each of them was made. And that tells you about the people who made them, the worlds in which they lived, and what they thought about and what they considered important. Depending on your own interests, some of these essays will hold you more than others, but all are very well written. Prown, in fact, made a point of instructing his students to "make their research disappear," to write in a way that was easy and appealing to read. There are a great many illustrations, too. This is a terrific book for encouraging one to look at one's surrounding world and its contents in a more thoughtful way. 12 of 13 people found the following review helpful. Thirteen superb commentaries by men and women By Midwest Book Review In *American Artifacts: Essays In Material Culture*, Jules Prown and Ken Haltman have assembled thirteen superb commentaries by men and women who articulately explore the cultural and social meanings ascribed to a variety of common objects ranging from teapots, card tables, and quilts, to cigarette lighters, telephones, and lava lamps. Here is an impressive and "reader friendly" collection of essays that are as informative and thought-provoking as they are erudite and challenging. *American Artifacts* is highly recommended reading for students of American popular culture and art.

When defining culture, one must indeed take into account even the minutest of details. What of a lighter, for example, or a telephone? The essays in this new collection examine just that. The contributors pose not only a historical, pragmatic use for the items, but also delve into more imaginative aspects of what defines us as Americans. Both the lighter and the telephone are investigated, as well as how the lava lamp represents sixties counterculture and containment. The late nineteenth-century corset is discussed as an embodiment of womanhood, and an Amish quilt is used as an illustration of cultural continuity. These are just a few of the artifacts discussed. Scholars will be intrigued by the historical interpretations that contributors proposed concerning a teapot, card table, and locket; students will not only find merit in the expositions, but also by learning from the models how such interpretation can be carried out. This collection helps us understand that very thing that makes us who we are. Viewing these objects from both our past and our present, we can begin to define what it is to be American.

"*American Artifacts* will serve well as a reader for a course in material culture studies... Informative as well as entertaining." -- Gerald W.R. Ward, *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography*, vol.126, April 2002, 355-57. "The essays in *American Artifacts* display vigorous,... creative historical research to augment intensely focused object study... Delightful, fresh, insightful." -- Gretchen T. Buggeln, *Winterthur Portfolio*, v.36, September 2002, 245-48. About the Author Jules David Prown is Paul Mellon Professor Emeritus of the History of Art, Yale University and the author of *John Singleton Copley and American Painting from Its Beginning to the Armory Show*. He has taught at Yale for almost forty years, and received the Distinguished Teaching of Art History Award from the College Art Association of America in 1995.