

The Stuff of History: Objects across Borders, 1500–1800 (HIST21152)



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(with Dr Stefan Hanß)

Course:

This course teaches students a brand new methodological toolkit of historical research: how to study history through objects. Material culture studies is a thriving and dynamic field of research that revolutionises how historians understand the past. The early modern period was characterised by fundamental material transformations: Global encounters engendered an ever more diversified and connected material world. Ever more things circulated, and ever more new materials and artefacts enticed, confused, and enriched societies in early modern Europe. This course explores the ways in which objects shaped every dimension of people's lives, from the consumption of new spices, intoxicants (like tobacco, tea and coffee), foodstuffs, materials like feathers, and luxurious clothes from early America, India and China, to new technologies like clocks and street lights that reordered the rhythm of rural and expanding urban communities.

Aims:

- To investigate how historians can interpret the past through the analysis of surviving material objects.
- To assess how the objects that were produced, consumed and circulated within Europe's expanding global borders, shaped the tastes, habits, behaviours, beliefs and routines of early modern communities.
- To investigate the potential of new technologies, and the socio-cultural contexts in which they were embedded, to reshape aspects of the early modern human experience.
- To teach students why collections in museums and heritage organisations are crucial source materials for our understanding of history – and its tangibility.
- To assess the entangled nature of social, economic, cultural and political relations between Europe and the wider world in a transformative era of global travel and exploration.

Recommended reading:

- 'A History of the World in 100 Objects', BBC website: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/ahistoryoftheworld/>
- Findlen, Paula (ed.), *Early Modern Things: Objects and their Histories, 1500-1800* (London: Routledge, 2013).
- Hamling, Tara, and Catherine Richardson (eds), *Everyday Objects: Medieval and Early Modern Culture and its Meanings* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2010).
- Jardine, Lisa, *Worldly Goods: A New History of the Renaissance* (London: Macmillan, 2006).
- MacGregor, Neil, *A History of the World in 100 Objects* (London: Penguin, 2012).
- Trentmann, Frank, *Empire of Things: How We Became a World of Consumers, from the Fifteenth Century to the Twenty-First* (London: Penguin, 2017)

Assessment

source analysis (1,500 words, 40%)

essay (2,500 words, 60%)