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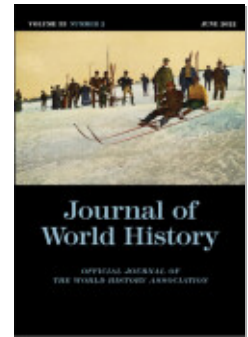
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The “Material Turn” in World and Global History*

GIORGIO RIELLO

This article charts the confluence and eventual overlap between two different fields: that of world/global history and that of material culture. At a basic level, world and global historians’ interest in “things” is the result of the fact that material artefacts—whether commodities, luxuries, scientific tools, ethnographic specimens or unique art objects—have been seen as mobile as than people. Yet, the so-called “material turn” in world/global history also raises a series of methodological and theoretical questions. I start with a historiographic overview to map the major currents and areas of global history affected by a “material turn.” Moving from a historiographical to a conceptual plane, the main body of this article is dedicated to showing how material culture might come to the assistance of world/global history. It provides a series of methodological and theoretical tools for historians to play with established narratives and to revise the conceptualization of connectivity—a key concept in global history. I conclude with some reflections on how a material approach might relate to recent forays into what is now called global microhistory, addressing issues of agency and the relationship between academic and public history.

KEYWORDS: early modern, material culture, global exchange, arts, consumption, connections.

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WHEN one talks about “turns” there is a risk of overemphasizing change. This is why the “cultural turn” and the “linguistic turn” in history have been cut back to size, especially after losing their novel appeal.¹ The 90-degree change of direction of a “turn” is not quite appropriate for a field such as global history, whose contours, agenda, and methodologies have yet to find a clear definition. This article charts instead the confluence and eventual overlap between two different fields: that of global history and that of material culture. “Material” is here used as a shorthand for a variety of different topics: the interest in commodities, luxuries, and artefacts as well as what is broadly called material culture. Examples of the marriage between global history and materiality and the role that things and their meaning have played in the past couple of decades in global history are extensive. There is now a sufficiently large body of scholarship to allow us to see established as well as emerging trends, themes, and indeed problems.²

This article is divided into four parts: a historiographic overview mapping the major currents and areas of global history affected by a “material turn,” followed by a consideration of how material culture might help revise established analytical frameworks in global history. Moving to a conceptual plane, the main body of this article is dedicated to how material culture might come to the assistance of global historians by providing a series of tools to reconceptualize what we might call the “spaces of the global” and in particular the meaning of connectivity—a key concept in global history. I conclude with some reflections on how a material approach might relate to recent forays into what is now called global microhistory, addressing issues of agency, and the relationship between academic and public history.

MATERIAL CULTURE AND GLOBAL HISTORY: THE HISTORY OF A MARRIAGE

If one looks at the existing publications that combine material culture and global history, one is struck by the fact that material culture approaches comprise a greater portion of global history works on the early modern period (ca. 1400–1800) than on the modern

¹ “AHR Forum Historiographic ‘Turns’ in Critical Perspective,” *The American Historical Review* 117, no. 3 (2012): 698–699.

² The relationship between material histories and histories of global trade and consumption is well studied. New material methodologies are applied to study indigeneity, power, as well as to approach histories of emotions and the senses on a global scale.

period. One of the reasons might be that unlike the nineteenth and twentieth centuries for which abundant diplomatic, imperial, and institutional sources exist, the early modern period—and most especially the period pre-1600—lacks the same richness. We are left instead with a variety of material artefacts—often to be seen in museums—that have been taken as examples of the connectivity that characterized the early modern world. These include priceless as well as ordinary cotton and silk cloth produced in China and India and traded across Eurasia and beyond; silver and gold artefacts made of metals mined in the Americas; Chinese, Japanese, and East Asian porcelain excavated in places as different as Italy and Mexico; emeralds, diamonds, and pearls from Asia and the Americas and ivories from South Asia and Africa; glass; lacquered objects; Japanese screens; maps and paintings; dyeing substances; feather capes and turbans; seal, beaver, and fish skins; elephants, tigers, and turkeys; foodstuffs such as sugar, cocoa, and tea; intoxicants such as opium and tobacco; intermediate products such as indigo and exotic woods; scientific instruments, shells, works of art and curios; instruments of torture and slavery. The list could continue but the point here is that the history of material culture is not simply an engagement with a random selection of things. It brings to the fore important methodological and theoretical questions for both the wider field of history and for global history in particular.

At a very basic level, historians’ interest in “things” is the result of the fact that material artefacts, whether commodities, luxuries, scientific tools, ethnographic specimens, or unique art objects, have been seen as mobile—even more than people. In an age before mass migration and fast travel, and when knowledge of the world—from whatever location—was partial at best, things did not just move across vast geographies and continents, but also came to embody “otherness”: the unknown, the different, and what is often inaccurately called “the exotic.” Scholars and broadcasters have taken material artefacts as a way to explain but also illustrate the connectivity of what has been called “the first global age.” Things that moved, “nomadic objects,” “peripatetic objects,” “material circulation,” “commodities,” “exogenous objects,” “frontier objects,” and “global things”³ have been given

³ See for instance Claire Farago, “The Peripatetic Life of Objects in the Era of Globalization,” in *Travel, Cultural Exchange and the Making of European Art, 1400–1900*, ed. Mary Sheriff (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010), 17–42; *The Global Lives of Things: The Material Culture of Connections in the Early Modern World*, ed. Anne Gerritsen and Giorgio Riello (London: Routledge, 2015); *Local Subversions of Colonial Cultures: Commodities and Anti-commodities in Global History*, ed. Sandip Hazareesingh and Harro Maat (London: Palgrave, 2015); *The Nomadic Object: The Challenge of World for Early Modern Religious Art*, ed. Christine Göttler and Mia M. Mochizuki (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2017); Ariane Fennetaux, Anne-Marie Miller-Blaise, and Nancy Oddo, eds., *Objets nomades: circulations matérielles, appropriations et formation des identités à l’ère de la première mondialisation, XVIe-XVIIIe siècles* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2020).

pride of place in narratives that over the past years have developed a conceptual apparatus that includes terms such as “contact,” “entanglement,” first and second “encounter,” “hybridity,” “translation,” “negotiation,” “reciprocity,” “intermediation,” “adaptation”—all used as key concepts in connected histories of premodern globalization.⁴ In recent times the more politically-loaded concepts of “appropriation,” “asymmetry,” “incommensurability,” “separation,” “dissent,” and “conflict” have also been fruitfully deployed in material narratives of global history.⁵

The interest in things and material culture in history precedes the more recent engagement by global historians.⁶ In fact one might say that global history has capitalized on a longstanding appreciation of materiality and material culture by disciplines such as anthropology and ethnography in what today are called material culture studies.⁷

⁴ The best piece on “connected history” still remains Sanjay Subrahmanyam, “Connected Histories: Notes Towards a Reconfiguration of Early Modern Eurasia,” *Modern Asian Studies* 31, no. 4 (1997): 735–762. For an example of the way in which material and visual culture helps dealing with a critical stand on the concept of hybridity, see: Carolyn Dean and Dana Leibsohn, “Hybridity and its Discontents: Considering Visual Culture in Colonial Spanish America,” *Colonial Latin American Review* 12, no. 1 (2003): 5–35. For a broader methodological reflection see: Susanna Burghartz, Lucas Burkart, and Christine Göttler, “Introduction: ‘Sites of Mediation’ in Early Modern Europe and Beyond. A Working Perspective,” in *Sites of Mediation: Connected Histories of Places, Processes, and Objects in Europe and Beyond, 1450–1650*, ed. Susanna Burghartz, Lucas Burkart, and Christine Göttler (Boston and Leiden: Brill, 2016), 1–20.

⁵ Especially on the concept of incommensurability, see: Sanjay Subrahmanyam, *Courtly Encounters: Translating Courtliness and Violence in Early Modern Eurasia* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012), 155. See also Id., “Par-delà l’incommensurabilité: pour une histoire connectée des empires aux temps modernes,” *Revue d’Histoire Moderne et Contemporaine* 54, no. 4-bis (2007): 34–53.

⁶ It includes for instance the French “material life,” the Italian “material renaissance,” the Dutch “embarrassment of riches,” the French “histoire des choses banales,” the Anglo-American “consumer society.” Paula Findlen, “Early Modern Things: Objects in Motion, 1500–1800,” in *Early Modern Things: Objects and Their Histories, 1500–1800*, ed. Paula Findlen (London: Routledge, 2013), 15.

⁷ See for instance the special issue on “the Cultural Biography of Objects,” *World Archaeology* 31, no. 2 (1999) and most especially the article by Laura Peers, “‘Many Tender Ties’: The Shifting Context and Meanings of the S. BLACK Bag,” 288–302. In the field of early modern European material history see the important work of David Gaimster, Tara Hamling, and Catherine Richardson: *Everyday Objects: Medieval and Early Modern Material Culture*, ed. Catherine Richardson and Tara Hamling (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2010); *The Routledge Handbook of Material Culture in Early Modern Europe*, ed. David Gaimster, Tara Hamling, and Catherine Richardson (Basingstoke: Routledge, 2016); and more recently *The Oxford Handbook of History and Material Culture*, ed. Ivan Gaskell and Sarah Anne Carter (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020).

Historians expressed a more limited interest in objects.⁸ Up until a generation ago “past things” were of interest to specific subfields of history—often under-represented in academia—such as the history of dress, textiles, furniture, design history, and the history of technology. The history of consumption has been one of the areas that have most contributed to a material turn, eventually affecting also global history. Since the 1980s, historians have extended their research in what Fernand Braudel called the “material life” of early modern Europeans.⁹ Work on inventories, wills, and notarial archives, as well as letters, accounts, and bankruptcy records has shown the importance of material artefacts in people’s lives. Originally framed within rigid national boundaries or focusing on specific locales, the history of consumption in Europe was important for its wider discussion of labor, the agency of people, as well as discussions on taste and comfort in the eighteenth century or power and splendor in the Renaissance.¹⁰

The art historian and sinologist Craig Clunas writing in 1999 in the pages of *The American Historical Review* observed the irony created by “the contrast between the constantly repeated global metaphor of a ‘world’ of goods and the rigorously localized context in which the discussion takes place.”¹¹ He claimed that to focus solely on Europe ignored wider scholarly trends that considered consumption in areas as different as China, Japan, the Ottoman Empire, and the Americas, therefore linking consumption to narratives of (European) modernization. More than twenty years after Clunas’ article, one can appreciate the fact that studies of consumption have been delocalized. An example might be this beautiful printed cotton cloth (Figure 1) in the collection of the Victoria and Albert Museum in London. A generation ago, this embroidered cotton cloth with silk yarn dated circa 1700 would have been appreciated for its decorative function as a bed

⁸ Paula Findlen, “Objects of History: The Past Materialized,” *History and Theory* 59, no. 2 (2020): 276–277.

⁹ *Writing Material Culture History*, ed. Anne Gerritsen and Giorgio Riello (London: Bloomsbury, 2nd ed. 2021), especially introduction, 1–18.

¹⁰ See for instance: John E. Crowley, *The Invention of Comfort: Sensibilities and Design in Early Modern Britain and Early America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001); *The Material Renaissance*, ed. Michelle O’Malley and Evelyn Welch (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007); John Styles, *The Dress of the People: Everyday Fashion in Eighteenth-Century England* (London and New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007); and Jan de Vries, *The Industrious Revolution: Consumer Behavior and the Household Economy, 1650 to the Present* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

¹¹ Craig Clunas, “Modernity Global and Local: Consumption and the Rise of the West,” *The American Historical Review* 104, no. 5 (1999): 1502. He critiqued in particular *Consumption and the World of Goods*, ed. John Brewer and Roy Porter (London: Routledge, 1993).



FIGURE 1. Wall hanging of embroidered cotton with silks, part of a set of hangings from Ashburnham House, Sussex, England, Produced in Gujarat, ca. 1700; 199 × 178 cm.

Source: Victoria and Albert Museum London, IS.155-1953.

hanging in the now demolished country house of Ashburnham Place in Sussex in the south of England. Today the same textile is better appreciated as an example of the types of Asian goods that in the late seventeenth century were fashionable in England and elsewhere in Europe. Beverly Lemire and John Styles have considered the processes,

chronologies, and mechanisms through which textiles such as chintzes, calicoes, and other printed and embroidered textiles came to be part of the domestic and fashion culture of premodern consumers in Europe.¹² They have used artefacts in their analysis of consuming patterns and have underlined how European consumers enjoyed a variety of goods imported from Asia and the Americas. This scholarship has been complemented by equally important quantitative work. Anne McCants, for instance, in her analysis of Dutch orphans’ inventories, shows how Chinese and Japanese porcelain and Indian printed calicoes were owned not just by the social elites but also by the middling classes and more modest Dutch artisans.¹³

The same bed hangings can be taken today as an example not of the consumption of Asian things, but of the trade of “global commodities,” goods that were exchanged in this case from north-west India to England especially by the European East India companies.¹⁴ In my own scholarship on cotton textiles, I point to the fact that more than half of all goods imported into Europe by the European East India companies in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries were silk and cotton textiles.¹⁵ Most of what was imported was not as beautiful as these hangings; yet the trade that in the early modern period crisscrossed different continents had a material repercussion not just on patterns of consumption but also on exchange and production, inspiring imitation and fostering technological change.¹⁶ Material goods created connectivity as they put into contact and shaped symbiotic relationships between areas of the world that previously had been either

¹² Beverly Lemire, *Fashion’s Favourite: The Cotton Trade and the Consumer in Britain, 1660–1800* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), Id., *Cotton* (Oxford: Berg, 2003); Giorgio Riello, *Cotton: The Fabric that Made the Modern World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013); Liza Oliver, *Art, Trade and Imperialism in Early Modern French India* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2019).

¹³ Anne McCants, “Porcelain for the Poor: The Material Culture of Tea and Coffee Consumption in Eighteenth-century Amsterdam,” in *Early Modern Things*, 316–341; Id., “Becoming Consumers: Asiatic Goods in Migrant and Native-born Middling Households in Eighteenth-century Amsterdam,” in *Goods from the East: Trading Eurasia, 1600–1800*, ed. Maxine Berg, Felicia Gottmann, Hanna Hodacs, and Chris Nierstrasz (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2015), 197–215.

¹⁴ Berg et al., eds, *Goods from the East*.

¹⁵ Giorgio Riello, “The Globalization of Cotton Textiles: Indian Cottons, Europe and the Atlantic World, 1600–1850,” in *The Spinning World: A Global History of Cotton Textiles, 1200–1850*, ed. Giorgio Riello and Prasanna Parthasarathi (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 261–287.

¹⁶ Maxine Berg, “In Pursuit of Luxury: Global History and British Consumer Goods in the Eighteenth Century,” *Past & Present* 182 (2004): 85–142. See also Id., “Consumption in Global History in the Early Modern Period,” in *Global Economic History*, ed. Tirthankar Roy and Giorgio Riello (London: Bloomsbury, 2018), 118–133.

disconnected or not in direct contact.¹⁷ The case of textiles shows that this was not just a relationship between the manufacturing powerhouses of Asia (China and India) and Europe but extended to Southeast Asia and the Atlantic.¹⁸

Beyond textiles, the trade from the Americas of produce and foodstuffs and drugs (cocoa, coffee, and sugar), often transplanted from Eurasia and reshaped into plantation production through the use of slave labor, adds a further important dimension and connects what Jan de Vries has indicated as the Atlantic and the Asian sides of premodern world trade.¹⁹ The history of trade and economic history have been dealing with commodities for a long time.²⁰ The exchange of luxuries such as large-size chintzes would have not been possible without the trade of silver that connected the mines of Potosí in Latin America, the financial institutions of Europe, and the demand for precious metal in India and most especially China.²¹ Scholarship on the global histories of raw cotton, dyes such as indigo and cochineal, foodstuffs such as cod, and precious materials such as ivory have expanded Braudel's "wheels of commerce" well beyond Europe and the Mediterranean.²² Classic

¹⁷ Janet Abu-Lughod reminds us that the lack of long-distance connectivity was often mediated through a series of overlapping spheres of exchange across Afro-Eurasia. Janet Abu-Lughod, *Before European Hegemony: The World System A.D. 1250–1350* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991).

¹⁸ John Guy, *Woven Cargoes: Indian Textiles in the East* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1998); Ruth Barnes, *Textiles in Indian Ocean Societies* (London: Routledge, 2004); Rosemary Crill, *The Fabrics of India* (London: V&A, 2015); Robert DuPlessis, *The Material Atlantic: Clothing, Commerce, and Colonization in the Atlantic World, 1650–1800* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015); Kazuo Kobayashi, *Indian Cotton Textiles in West Africa: African Agency, Consumer Demand and the Making of the Global Economy, 1750–1850* (London: Palgrave, 2019).

¹⁹ Jan de Vries, "The Limits of Globalisation in the Early Modern World," *The Economic History Review* 63, no. 3 (2010): 710–733. See also Maxine Berg, "Global History and the Transformation of Early Modern Europe," in *History after Hobsbawm: Writing the Past for the Twenty-First Century*, ed. John H. Arnold, Matthew Hilton, and Jan Rieger (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 140–159.

²⁰ See for instance the important collection edited by Angela Schottenhammer, ed., *Early Global Interconnectivity across the Indian Ocean World. Vol. I. Commercial Structures and Exchange* (London: Palgrave, 2019).

²¹ *Monetary History in Global Perspective, 1470–1800*, ed. Dennis O. Flynn, Arturo Giráldez, and Richard von Glahn (Aldershot: Ashgate Press, 2003); Kris Lane, *Potosí: The Silver City That Changed the World* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2019).

²² See for instance: Martha Chaiklin, "Ivory in World History – Early Modern Trade in Context," *History Compass* 8, no. 6 (2010): 530–542; *From Silver to Cocaine: Latin American Commodity Chains and the Building of the World Economy, 1500–2000*, ed. Steven Topik, Carlos Marichal, and Zephyr Frank (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006); Regina Grafe, *Distant Tyranny: Markets, Power and Backwardness in Spain* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012), 52–79; Elena Phipps, "Global Colors: Dyes and the Dye Trade," in *Interwoven Globe: The Worldwide Textile Trade, 1500–1800*, ed. Amelia Peck (London: Thames & Hudson, 2013), 120–135.

economic history approaches that focused on the quantification of general categories of “traded goods” are now complemented by material-culture inflected studies that consider what was traded also from a material point of view, taking into account issues such as quality, variety, productive skills, as well as storing, merchandising, and retail.

From Sydney Mintz to Marcy Norton, scholarship has gone beyond classic economic narratives by considering the political, and cultural dimensions of production, exchange, and consumption.²³ This is the case of the smoking of tobacco, whose story as a commodity to this day cannot be told without considering its cultural connotations in the Americas, its opposition in Europe, Russia, and China, and its eventual acceptance as part of new social practices in most of the world.²⁴ These works also point to a new sensibility among historians that requires commodities to be considered beyond their European remit of circulation. While the existing literature still underlines the centrality of Europe in early modern global trade and in the processes of early modern globalization, the role of other areas of the world, the importance of localized production, and the complexity of multilateral exchange bring a wider lens to the history of premodern material global history.²⁵

The engagement with unique objects and expensive luxuries has also pushed the agenda beyond established narratives. Rather than charting the ways in which material goods were commodified by global forces and most especially by European motivations, recent scholarship has focused on material things that did not enter into market systems and did not necessarily participate in the shaping of world economies. This is illustrated in the work on the many ambassadorial gifts

²³ Sidney Mintz, *Sweetness and Power: The Place of Sugar in Modern History* (New York: Viking, 1985); Marcy Norton, “Tasting Empire: Chocolate and the European Internalization of Mesoamerican Aesthetics,” *The American Historical Review* 111, no. 3 (2006): 660–691; Id., *Sacred Gifts, Profane Pleasures: A History of Tobacco and Chocolate in the Atlantic World* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2008).

²⁴ Matthew Romaniello, “Through the Filter of Tobacco: The Limits of Global Trade in the Early Modern World,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 49, no. 4 (2007): 914–937; Norton, *Sacred Gifts*; Carol Benedict, *Golden-Silk Smoke: A History of Tobacco in China, 1550–2010* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011); Ina Baghdiantz McCabe, *A History of Global Consumption, 1500–1800* (London: Routledge, 2015), esp. 64–85; Roberto Zaugg, “Le crachoir chinois du roi: marchandises globales, culture de cour et vodun dans les royaumes de Hueda et du Dahomey (XVIIe-XIXe siècles),” *Annales HSS* 73, no. 1 (2018): 119–159; Tricia Starks, *Smoking under the Tsars: A History of Tobacco in Imperial Russia* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2018).

²⁵ On this point see Anne Gerritsen and Giorgio Riello, “Introduction: The Global Lives of Things. Material Culture in the First Global Age,” in *The Global Lives of Things*, 1–28.

exchanged between European states but also between European and non-European powers.²⁶ This scholarship draws from a now vast literature on “global art” that sits at the intersection between museum studies and art history, and which has offered a number of important theoretical and historical analyses on “transcultural” artistic (two-dimensional drawings, prints, and paintings and three-dimensional sculptures, artefacts, and architectures) exchanges especially within Eurasia and more recently also between Eurasia, Africa, and the Americas.²⁷ Works on “luxury objects” have also highlighted the political, labor, and environmental aspects of global material fluxes, as for instance in recent works on pearls and on gems.²⁸

The characterization of the encounter between two fields, that of global history and that of material culture, is inaccurate also for another reason. As global history has evolved to include topics and problems that were previously treated within local, national, and continental area perspectives, so “the material” has been mobilized accordingly. The history of science, for instance, has adopted a global approach in considering transfers of knowledge through codified texts, embodied in

²⁶ Harriet Rudolph, “Entangled Objects and Hybrid Practices? Material Culture as a New Approach to the History of Diplomacy,” *European History Yearbook*, issue on “Material Culture in Modern Diplomacy from the 15th to the 20th Century,” 17 (2016): 1–28; issue on “Objects in Motion in the Early Modern World,” ed. Meredith Martin and Daniela Bleichmar, *Art History* 38, no. 4 (2015); issue on “The Art of Embassy: Objects and Images of Early Modern Diplomacy,” ed. Nancy Um and Leah R. Clark, *Journal of Early Modern History* 20, no. 1 (2016); issue on “Diplomacy and Cultural Translation in the Early Modern World,” ed. Toby Osborne and Joan-Pau Rubiés, *Journal of Early Modern History* 20, no. 4 (2016); *Global Gifts: The Material Culture of Diplomacy in Early Modern Eurasia*, ed. Zoltán Biedermann, Anne Gerritsen, and Giorgio Riello (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2018), esp. introduction.

²⁷ See for instance *Artistic and Cultural Exchanges between Europe and Asia, 1400–1900*, ed. Michael North (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2010); *Circulations in the Global History of Art*, ed. Thomas DaCosta Kaufmann, Catherine Dossin, and Béatrice Joyeux-Prunel (London: Routledge, 2015); *The Itineraries of Art: Topographies of Artistic Mobility in Europe and Asia*, ed. Karin Gludovatz, Juliane Noth, and Joachim Rees (Paderborn: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 2015); Tamara H. Bentley, *Picturing Commerce in and from the East Asian Maritime Circuits, 1550–1800: Visual and Material Culture, 1300–1700* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2018); and *Art, Trade, and Cultural Mediation in Asia, 1600–1950*, ed. Raquel A. G. Reyes (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2019).

²⁸ Sven Dupré, “Trading Luxury Glass, Picturing Collections and Consuming Objects of Knowledge in Early Seventeenth-century Antwerp,” *Intellectual History Review* 20 (2010): 53–78; Kris Lane, *Colour of Paradise: The Emerald in the Age of Gunpowder Empires* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010); *Luxury in a Global Perspective: Commodities and Practices, 1600–2000*, ed. Karin Hofmeester and Bernd-Stefan Grewe (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017); Molly A. Warsh, *American Baroque: Pearls and the Nature of Empire, 1492–1700* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2018); *Gems in the Early Modern World: Materials, Knowledge and Global Trade, 1450–1800*, ed. Michael Bycroft and Sven Dupré (London: Palgrave, 2019).

people, but also “materialized” in things. This includes the artisanal practices that in the vast space of later medieval Eurasia brought into being knowledge systems for instance on materials such as mercury and sulfur.²⁹ Similarly, in Europe the collecting of plants, minerals, animals as well as ethnographic objects from different parts of the world had paramount importance in “producing” new knowledge from the fifteenth century onwards.³⁰ Artefacts created systems of knowledge, challenged established normative structures, and stimulated visual, tactile, and olfactory imagination through the collecting of beautiful *naturalia* and *artificialia* as well as the rare, the arcane, the simply bizarre.³¹

A similar trajectory of transformation can be observed for histories of dress and fashion that had long centered on Europe. The survival of sometimes fragile dress and textile items in many Western museum collections dating back at least to the European middle ages has long been coupled with theoretical and historiographical explanations on the unicity of Western fashion. While most people in the world—present and past—wear some form of clothing, scholars distinguished fashion from costume and attributed to the latter unchanging characteristics that often served to present the non-European world not just as fixed in time but also a-historical. New material culture methodologies and a broader appreciation for non-European dress has revised these narratives showing the importance of fashion in areas of the world as different as premodern Japan, Tang to Qing China, and

²⁹ Pamela H. Smith, “Itineraries of Materials and Knowledge in the Early Modern World,” in *The Global Lives of Things*, 31–61. See also *Entangled Itineraries: Materials, Practices, and Knowledges across Eurasia*, ed. Pamela H. Smith (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2019).

³⁰ Paula Findlen, *Possessing Nature: Museums, Collecting, and Scientific Culture in Early Modern Italy* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994); Anne Goldgar, *Tulipmania: Money, Honor, and Knowledge in the Dutch Golden Age* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2007); Daniela Bleichmar, *Visible Empire: Botanical Expeditions and Visual Culture in the Hispanic Enlightenment* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2012).

³¹ *Colonial Botany: Colonial Botany Science, Commerce, and Politics in the Early Modern World*, ed. Londa Schiebinger and Claudia Swan (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005); *Making Knowledge in Early Modern Europe: Practices, Objects, and Texts, 1400–1800*, ed. Pamela H. Smith and Benjamin Schmidt (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2007); *Merchants and Marvels: Commerce, Science, and Art in Early Modern Europe*, ed. Pamela H. Smith and Paula Findlen (London and New York: Routledge, 2002); Harold J. Cook, *Matters of Exchange: Commerce, Medicine, and Science in the Dutch Golden Age* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007); Stefan Hanß, “Material Encounters: Knotting Cultures in Early Modern Peru and Spain,” *The Historical Journal* 62, no. 3 (2019): 1–33; Angelica Groom, *Exotic Animals in the Art and Culture of the Medici Court in Florence* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2019); Sarah Easterby-Smith, “Recalcitrant Seeds: Material Culture and the Global History of Science,” *Past & Present* 242 Supplement 14 (2019): 215–242.

Colonial Latin America.³² Central to this change of interpretation has been the questioning of the universalization of (European) categories of analysis.³³

Similarly the history of food is no longer interested solely in local dietary cultures but—even in a context in which material evidence is ephemeral—it constructs global analyses through the lens of specific foodstuffs such as tomatoes, potatoes, rice, and pineapples.³⁴ The material acts as a bridge to reflect on wider historiographical and historical problems as for instance in the case of slavery by questioning established narratives of subordination of the slave body through the analysis of the clothing worn or the food eaten by enslaved people.³⁵ Finally, an emerging literature on the politics of things has adopted post-colonial theory and methods to address issues of indigeneity, race, and identity as for instance in recent studies of the European infiltration into the Pacific Ocean and Atlantic America especially in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.³⁶

³² See for instance Michelle Maskiell, “Consuming Kashmir: Shawls and Empires, 1500–2000,” *Journal of World History* 13, no. 1 (2000): 27–65. For broader reflections on fashion, dress, and costume in Europe and globally see: Ulinka Rublack, *Dressing Up: Cultural Identity in Renaissance Europe* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010); Beverly Lemire, *Global Trade and the Transformation of Consumer Cultures: The Material World Remade, c. 1500–1820* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018).

³³ Robert Ross, *Clothing: A Global History* (Cambridge: Polity, 2007). See also Carlo Marco Belfanti, “Was Fashion a European Invention?” *Journal of Global History* 3, no. 3 (2008): 419–443; my critique in Giorgio Riello, “Fashion in the Four Parts of the World: Time, Space and Early Modern Global Change,” in *Dressing Global Bodies: The Political Power of Dress in World History*, ed. Beverly Lemire and Giorgio Riello (London: Routledge, 2020), 41–64; and the forthcoming *Cambridge Global History of Fashion*, ed. Christopher Breward, Beverly Lemire, and Giorgio Riello (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022).

³⁴ Rebecca Earle, *The Body of the Conquistador: Food, Race, and the Colonial Experience in Spanish America, 1492–1700* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012); Kaori O’Connor, *Pineapple: A Global History* (London: Reaktion, 2013); *Rice: Global Networks and New Histories*, ed. Francesca Bray, Peter A. Coclanis, Edda L. Fields-Black, and Dagmar Schäfer (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015); Rebecca Earle, *Potato* (London: Bloomsbury, 2019). See also Anne Gerritsen, “From Long-distance Trade to the Global Lives of Things: Writing the History of Early Modern Trade and Material Culture,” *Journal of Early Modern History* 20, no. 4 (2016): esp. 543–544.

³⁵ On rice and slave knowledge, see: Judith A. Carney, *Black Rice: The African Origins of Rice Cultivation in the Americas* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001). On clothing see the recent contributions by Sophie White, “Dressing Enslaved Africans in Colonial Louisiana,” and Miki Sugiura, “Garments in Circulation: The Economies of Slave Clothing in the Eighteenth-century Dutch Cape Colony,” both in *Dressing Global Bodies*, ed. Lemire and Riello, 85–103, and 104–130.

³⁶ See how these approaches have informed the recent scholarship by Lemire, *Global Trade and the Transformation of Consumer Cultures*; Ralph Bauer and Marcy Norton, “Introduction. Entangled Trajectories: Indigenous and European Histories,” *Colonial Latin American Review* 26, no. 1 (2017): 1–17.

This brief excursus is anything but comprehensive: a material perspective informs a variety of themes some of which have been “globalized” also thanks to a focus on material culture. In doing so, however, new problems have emerged. First is the above-mentioned “Euro-centered” perspective of much scholarship on global material culture. If artefacts and material culture methodologies are to be useful to global history, so the imbalance caused by the fact that most of the existing scholarship discusses “global things” that either come to Europe, come from Europe, or at least pass through Europe has to be addressed.³⁷ This is no surprise because the documentation that allows historians to make sense of what otherwise might be a “de-contextualized” object, is more often than not produced by European institutions and individuals in layered processes over centuries. The rich literature on the European East India companies, the extensive archives detailing their trade in a variety of commodities and luxuries, and the survival of extant examples such as printed calicoes in museums as seen in [Figure 1](#) have focused the attention of material culture histories on the maritime connection between Europe and Asia and on the manufactured objects exchanged within this space of connectivity.³⁸ Scholars need to be aware of underlying assumptions and cataloguing criteria that structured collections as the accumulation of studies unwittingly leads to the reinforcing of traditional views on the centrality of Europe in global connectivity, something that is as unfortunate as it is incorrect especially the more one goes back in time.

The second issue that recent scholarship on global material culture reveals is a certain methodological tension, perhaps even eclecticism. There is a tendency for creating global narratives driven by the thrust of one object or commodity (cotton, ivory, salt, silver, emeralds, etc.). Yet more rarely these specific things become entry points through which to reflect on the type of global history that is narrated. In this sense, there

³⁷ Important exceptions are: Dana Leibold, “Made in China/Made in Mexico,” in *At the Crossroads: The Arts of Spanish America and Early Global Trade*, ed. Donna Pierce and Ronald Otsuka (Denver: Denver Art Museum, 2012), 11–40; Meha Priyadarshini, *Chinese Porcelain in Colonial Mexico: The Material Worlds of an Early Modern Trade* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2018).

³⁸ In the past two decades new scholarship has “decolonized” these narratives, especially in relation to museum collecting and display. See *Sensible Objects: Colonialism, Museums and Material Culture*, ed. Elizabeth Edwards, Chris Gosden, and Ruth B. Phillips (Oxford: Berg, 2006); *Unpacking the Collection: Networks of Material and Social Agency in the Museum*, ed. Sarah Byrne, Anne Clarke, Rodney Harrison, and Robin Torrence (New York: Springer, 2011); *The Lives of Colonial Object*, ed. Annabel Cooper, Lachy Paterson, and Angela Wanhalla (Otago: University of Otago Press, 2015); and Beverly Lemire, “Indigeneity and Race and the Politics of Museum Collections,” in *Writing Material Culture History*, 319–325.

is no single “material culture” but a variety of different material histories. When Anne Gerritsen and I paraphrased Appadurai’s “social life of things” into a “global lives of things,” we acknowledged a plurality of situations under the banner of the “global.” At the same time, we were aware that while Appadurai saw his “social life” as an approach or a lens (for instance in processes of commodification), our “global lives” expressed instead a condition similar to that of individuals who moved across intercontinental geographies. There is now much more of a need to reflect on the methodological implications of using material “things” and how their global lives might become a way of analyzing and of shaping global history, points to which I will return in the second part of this article.

A final observation relates instead to what I call the “backlash against global history.” Jeremy Adelman’s self-critique of the field and the rebuke by Drayton and Motadel have made us aware that global history and global material culture prioritize the cosmopolitan over the provincial, the mobile over the static, and might reproduce global historians’ liberal ideologies.³⁹ Material culture belongs to a type of global history that engages with mobility and movement, but is oblivious to so-called “small spaces,” of the specificity of contexts, in works that—as John-Paul Ghobrial noted—“prioritize the movement of global historical phenomena over the explanation of their occurrence in particular contexts.”⁴⁰ By doing so, global history becomes exclusionary, surely of those who did not move, who did not trade, or did not consume commodities and luxuries produced elsewhere in the world.

My aim in the rest of this article is to reflect on the ways in which a material approach might further develop the methodologies of global history. I single out three areas that have been at the center of global historians’ attention in recent years. First, I ask how material artefacts might help us to revise established narratives in history, further developing global history’s critical stance. Second, at a methodological level I consider the ways in which things help us address the relationship between the global and the local in global history. Finally, at a theoretical level, I ask what role artefacts and commodities might play in what is now called “global-micro” history.

³⁹ Jeremy Adelman, “What is Global History Now?": <https://aeon.co/essays/is-global-history-still-possible-or-has-it-had-its-moment> [last accessed April 10, 2020] and Richard Drayton and David Motadel, “Discussion: The Future of Global History,” *Journal of Global History* 13, no. 1 (2018): 1–21.

⁴⁰ John-Paul A. Ghobrial, “Introduction: Seeing the World like a Microhistorian,” *Past & Present* 242, Special issue 14 (2019): 8.

THINGS AND THE REVISING OF (META)NARRATIVES

Material culture has been successfully used as a methodological tool as much as a historical topic. One can consider the role that material things had in history (at a local, national or global scale) but also use material things to critique, revise, or recontextualize established narratives. The ability of artefacts to raise open questions is one of their attributes that should not be underestimated. I wish here to consider how material culture can revise historical narratives that range from Alfred Crosby’s “Columbian exchange,” to the New History of Diplomacy, to Kenneth Pomeranz’s “Great Divergence.”

The so-called Columbian exchange was a concept minted in the early 1970s.⁴¹ Historian Alfred Crosby saw the arrival of Europeans in the Americas not as a major political or even economic turning point, but as a moment of profound environmental and biological restructuring due to the transfer of plants, animals, and diseases across continents. Students are presented with a map that charts the transfer of American tomatoes and potatoes to Europe and the opposite transfer of bananas, onions, livestock, and a range of illnesses to the Americas. The Columbian exchange was eventually broadened to include technologies, human populations, and ideas. Take however a screen—a masterpiece at the Art Institute of Chicago: it was created in 1625–1675 and its make, golden background, stylistic motifs, and materials make it a distinctively Japanese artefact (Figure 2). It was not destined to export (as was the case of the so-called “Nanban” screens purchased by Portuguese traders) but for domestic consumption by the military class, the aristocracy, and wealthy merchants. Yet this “local” artefact is a useful tool for us to reflect not just on the artist’s choices and the patron’s aesthetic and material preferences, but more widely on the nature of the Columbian exchange. It represents two plants: cockscombs that is native to Japan and maize that was instead imported by the Portuguese after their arrival in Japan in 1543. The artist was keen to expand his repertoire to include new and exotic subjects, in this case a crop like maize that came from the Americas.

Focusing on the remit of the Columbian exchange beyond Europe, this artefact stands as a testimony of the ways in which maize spread to East Asia, an aspect not considered by Crosby in his original formulation. By the time the screen was produced maize had been cultivated in Japan for possibly half a century. In Japan as in China and

⁴¹ Alfred W. Crosby, *Columbian Exchange: Biological and Cultural Consequences of 1492* (Westport, CO: Greenwood Press, 1972).



FIGURE 2. Japanese “Maize and Cockscombs” six-panel screen, mid-seventeenth century. Ink, color, and gold on paper. 170.2 × 357 cm. Source: Art Institute of Chicago, Kate S. Buckingham Endowment, 1959.599. Artokoloro/Alamy Foto Stock 2A2K1RN.

Europe, maize came to change the agrarian landscape. Yet the artist’s decision to combine the domestic and foreign with the curled alien maize lazily bent over the bright red stalks of the native cockscombs tells us of the implications of new crops beyond their agrarian and nutritional histories: how they influenced societies and how they assumed new cultural characteristics. This screen—beyond the beauty of the object itself—is a rethinking of the Columbian exchange in terms of new geographies and according to less functional parameters than Crosby had originally intended.

Material culture approaches have profoundly reshaped also established fields such as diplomatic history. Until a couple of decades ago, the history of diplomacy was dominated by high politics, the decisions of rules, and the impact of treaties and wars. The rise of New Diplomatic History has brought forward at least two sets of new concerns: first, an appreciation that cultural practices in diplomacy—as for instance in the strict protocol of premodern embassies—were not simple manifestations of higher principles or political ideas but were instead constitutive of diplomacy itself. Second, traditional narratives based on the professionalization of diplomacy—as for instance with the creation of permanent embassies by European powers—became untenable. Sources showed the rich diplomatic

cultures of principalities, kingdoms, and empires in Asia, Africa, and the Americas in premodern times.⁴²

Material culture has been used to investigate long-distance diplomacy as well as local negotiating skills: splendid gifts were a must in ruler-to-ruler relationships and are taken as tools by historians to understand unspoken assumptions, differences in attitudes, and strategies in cross-cultural mediation. They can also help us to revise common-held understandings that tend to privilege Europe. This is the case for animals, one of the most common types of gifts in premodern state-to-state diplomacy. Historians of the middle ages are well acquainted with Abul-Abbas, the Asian elephant that the Abbasid caliph Harun al-Rashid—“king of the Persians” as contemporary sources explained—“gifted” to Charlemagne in 802 C.E. This elephant was not quite a gift but a request from the Christian emperor.⁴³ Exotic animals had political meaning and associated their holders to past rulers who had had a similar privilege. This was also the case for the giraffe that the ruler of Florence, Lorenzo de Medici, received as a gift from Sultan Qā’itbāy (ca. 1416–1496) of Egypt in 1487. The animal was sent in the hope of enticing the support of Florence against the Ottoman Empire.⁴⁴ Lorenzo was well aware of its rarity and most probably knew that since antiquity only one other giraffe had reached Europe in 1261. This is why the animal was paraded around Florence and subsequently represented in several frescoes. Yet a focus on the giraffe allows us to see how this animal might have been unique in Europe but was not as unique as Lorenzo de Medici and his Florentine subjects might have thought. The rulers of Egypt had been sending giraffes as diplomatic gifts for centuries. Sultan an-Nasir Muhammad (r. 1299–1341) sent giraffes to both the Artukid ruler of Mardin in Anatolia and the sultan of Morocco. A couple of generations later in 1404 the Mamluk sultan of Egypt, al-Nasir Faraj (r. 1399–1412) sent a giraffe to Tamerlane (r. 1370–1405) then resident in the city of Khoy in northwestern Iran: “This animal has a body as big as a horse but with an extremely long neck. Its forelegs are very much longer than the hind legs, and its hoofs are divided like those of cattle,” we are told by the

⁴² *Global Gifts*, ed. Biedermann, Gerritsen, and Riello, esp. introduction.

⁴³ Giuseppe Albertoni, *L’elefante di Carlo Magno* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2020).

⁴⁴ Doris Behrens-Abouseif, *Practicing Diplomacy in the Mamluk Sultanate: Gifts and Material Culture in the Medieval Islamic World* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2016), 114. See also Angelica Groom, *Exotic Animals in the Art and Culture of the Medici Court in Florence* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2019), and more widely on Florence global material culture, Lia Markey, *Imagining the Americas in Medici Florence* (Pennsylvania, PA: Penn State University Press, 2016).

Spaniard Ruy Gonzalez de Clavijo in his colorful account of the embassy which at the same time also payed homage to Tamerlane.⁴⁵

Clavijo's report kindled the European imagination of this near mythical animal well before a specimen reached Florence eighty years later. The giraffe alerts us to the wide diplomatic circuits of North Africa and Central Asia in which Italy was marginal at best. Europe was not always at the forefront of such processes and might be said to have lagged behind great empires such as Ming China and the rising new Islamic empires of the Ottomans, Mughals, and Safavids.⁴⁶ Tamerlane's gift also alerts us to the fact that written and visual sources have to supplement material culture methodologies especially when objects—as in the case of living animals—did not survive long. Literary works such as Clavijo's testimony have to be integrated with visual accounts as in the case of the beautiful miniature from *Zafarnama* commissioned by the Timurid prince Ibrahim Sultan to recount the exploits of his grandfather Tamerlane (Figure 3).

In the early 2000s, economic history was one of the first fields of history to be affected by new global concerns. Its social-science methodologies and the importance of international and comparative methodologies made it a suitable candidate to “go global.” Interestingly, global approaches were not readily accepted in analyses of the nineteenth- and twentieth-century international economy, but came to dominate the classic industrial revolution debates. Kenneth Pomeranz's *Great Divergence* produced a new “metanarrative” that compared and contrasted North-west Europe's industrialization with the Yangtze Delta's path of economic development. Pomeranz's ecologic, resource-based, and fully macro approach focused on factors and conditions rather than delving into processes. It adopted a static comparative framework in line with classic economic theory and, by necessity, did not consider the trajectories of individual sectors, the stories of specific products, or the actions of particular individuals.⁴⁷

⁴⁵ *Embassy to Tamerlane: 1403–1406*, by Clavijo (London: Routledge, 2004), 80. See also Barry Hoberma, “A Giraffe for Tamerlane,” *Saudi Aramco* 31, no. 6 (1980): 12–17.

⁴⁶ This is the case of the famous giraffe from the city of Melinda in East Africa that Admiral Zheng He brought back to the Ming court in Beijing in 1415. Samuel M. Wilson, “The Emperor's Giraffe,” *Natural History* 101, no. 12 (1992): 22–26; Id., *The Emperor's Giraffe: And Other Stories of Cultures in Contact* (London: Perseus, 2000); Erik Ringmar, “Audience for a Giraffe: European Expansionism and the Quest for the Exotic,” *Journal of World History* 17, no. 4 (2006): 353–373.

⁴⁷ Kenneth Pomeranz, *The Great Divergence: Europe, China, and the Making of the Modern World Economy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000).

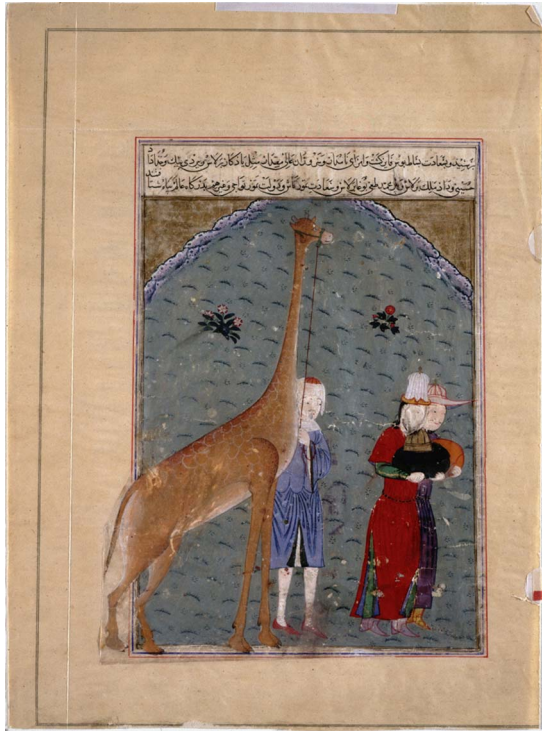


FIGURE 3. The ambassadors of the Egyptian Sultan al-Nasir Faraj ibn Barquq present their gifts of tribute, including a giraffe, to Timur (1370–1405). Manuscript of the *Zafarnama of Sharaf al-Din ‘Ali Yazdi* Shiraz, Iran, 1436. Source: Watercolor, gold, and ink on paper, 24.2 × 17.8 cm. Worcester Museum, Jerome Wheelock Fund, 1935.26.

Global historians have struggled not so much—as it is often said—to overcome macro or metanarratives. Rather their main impediment has been how to enmesh explanations that are both large and small and that deal with the specific as well as the general. Pomeranz’s comparison *a deux* has been supplemented and nuanced; most of global economic history knows how to distinguish the tree from the forest and what “to leave out” (to borrow William McNeill’s expression) but as a consequence sacrifices the detail for the bigger picture. My contention here is that in doing so, the fine grain has been lost in terms of nuance and, most especially, in the quest for challenging and revising established truisms.

Can material culture help? Two problems are immediately apparent: first, the fact that while global narratives tend to encompass entire continents and large swathes of time, “things” are most often than not “punctuated” in time and space. Take this box made in France in the mid eighteenth century and used for holding snuff (Figure 4). Its lustrous red color was produced by using a technique called *vernis Martin*, a form of japauning that imitated lacquer and a process that was perfected by the Parisian Martin brothers who in 1733 received the right to a royal privilege from Louis XV of France.⁴⁸ At face value, this object has little to say about global history and the great divergence. Decorative art scholarship has classified and studied the Martin brothers’ production and attributed to them pieces admired in many



FIGURE 4. Box, made in France, 1740–1770. Mâché decorated with japauning (imitation lacquer); chased and gilded metal hinge and fastening. Source: Williams Hearn Gift. Victoria and Albert Museum W.44&A-1923.

⁴⁸ Anne Forray-Carlier and Monika Kopplin, *Les secrets de la laque française: Le vernis Martin* (Paris: Les Arts Décoratifs, 2014).

design and art museums internationally. Such scholarship noted that the *vernis Martin* and other similar types of japanning—as the name suggests—was produced in imitation of artefacts reaching Europe from Japan—as well as China and India—from the seventeenth century onwards. Repeated attempts were made to reproduce the shiny effect of lacquer, eventually creating a varnish by heating oil and copal and adding Venetian turpentine.

Historian Maxine Berg noted the importance of Asian luxuries in Europe. These included not just lacquer, but also cotton and silk textiles, and porcelain whose production in Europe emerged in the course of the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries as a form of substitution of Asian goods.⁴⁹ John Styles similarly has showed how imitation, transposition across materials, and adaptation of goods to European taste became a major force for technological change in many British manufacturing sectors.⁵⁰ Beverly Lemire’s work on cotton textiles has explained that this might have entailed the creation of new productive processes as well as attempts at mastering original Asian techniques.⁵¹ By using artefacts, the narratives of divergence and European industrialization have been revised to show the profound connection that existed between technological (and even scientific) renewal in Europe and the global trade of goods. While the metanarrative of the great divergence might remain unscathed, material culture approaches have provided a great deal of evidence on the exact mechanisms that led Europe on a different technological, innovation, and ultimately economic path compared to East Asia. They have also connected manufacturing, trade, and consumption and have shown how connections across the world are as important a lens for narrating global change as comparative methodologies.

These three examples of the possible ways in which material culture can help revise and extend established historical interpretations, alert us also to the limitations of the field of material culture history at the intersection with global and world histories. First, one has to note a disjuncture between histories of trade and those of material culture.

⁴⁹ Berg, “In Pursuit of Luxury”; Id., “From Imitation to Invention: Creating Commodities in Eighteenth-century Britain,” *Economic History Review* 55, no. 1 (2002): 1–30.

⁵⁰ John Styles, “Product Innovation in Early Modern London,” *Past & Present* 168 (2000): 124–169.

⁵¹ Beverly Lemire and Giorgio Riello, “East & West: Textiles and Fashion in Early Modern Europe,” *Journal of Social History* 41, no. 4 (2008): 887–916. See also Giorgio Riello, “Asian Knowledge and the Development of Calico Printing in Europe in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries,” *Journal of Global History* 5, no. 1 (2010): 1–30.

While it is undeniable that there is an overlap between traded items and material culture, the two do not coincide: many goods that were traded across the early modern world are not fully considered by material culture methodologies. This is especially the case—as for instance with bulk goods—where little or no material evidence survives to document sometimes-important trade fluxes. Conversely material culture history has taken a broader view of “movement” that includes not just trade and exchange but also gifting, use, transcultural appropriation, reinterpretation, etc. One has also to acknowledge latent (as well as manifest) biases, as for instance the fact that the study of material culture has concentrated on manufactured artefacts, art, and luxuries to the detriment of raw materials, resources, and intermediate goods such as dyes, copper, mordants, etc. and other materials that served to create finished artefacts.⁵²

The second problem faced by the application of material culture methodologies to the study of global and world histories is one of periodization. Museums and cultural institutions whose collections are formed by a sedimentation of artefacts acquired over decades and sometimes centuries, tend to present a view of the material past that is selective and often disciplinary bound.⁵³ The more one moves in time towards the present, the more the materials available are abundant, comprehensive, and representative. The focus on artefacts—and most especially on those material things that because of their beauty, value, or cultural worth have been preserved over time—represents a challenge: these were the “exotic” items collected by early modern rulers, explorers, traders, and savants in Europe and by princes and emperors in many parts of Asia.⁵⁴ Even if they were produced before the sixteenth century, they are often interpreted as part of early modern collecting practices. Yet their material histories suggest more complex

⁵² George B. Souza, “Convergence before Divergence: Global Maritime Economic History and Material Culture,” *International Journal of Maritime History* 17, no. 1 (2005): 17–27. Another interesting exception is Veronika Hyden-Hanscho, “Beaver Hats, Drugs and Sugar Consumption in Vienna around 1700: France as an Intermediary for Atlantic Products,” in *Cultural Exchange and Consumption Patterns in the Age of Enlightenment: Europe and the Atlantic World*, ed. Veronika Hyden-Hanscho, Renate Pieper, and Werner Stangl (Bochum: Dieter Winkler Verlag, 2013), 153–168.

⁵³ For an engaging critique of material culture methodologies in history and museum studies, see Laurel Thatcher Ulrich Ivan Gaskell, Sara Schechner, and Sarah Anne Carter, *Tangible Things: Making History Through Things* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015).

⁵⁴ *Collecting across Cultures: Material Exchanges in the Early Modern Atlantic World*, ed. Daniela Bleichman and Peter C. Mancall (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011); *Curious Encounters: Voyaging, Collecting, and Making Knowledge in the Long Eighteenth Century*, ed. Adriana Craciun and Mary Terrall (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2019).

chronological narratives. Take for example the many pieces of Ming blue and white porcelain to be found in museum and private collections across the world. While they are often used to illustrate early modern global exchange, they show the potential to think also about technological and aesthetic exchange from Iran to China from the fourteenth century onwards.⁵⁵

The case of porcelain alerts us also to a third problem: the fact that more attention is attributed to long-distance than cross-regional or even regional exchange. Chinese porcelains traded to Europe are taken to be more representative of the early modern globe than similar porcelains traded to Southeast Asia or South Asia. Similarly, Indian cotton textiles traded to Europe and the Americas are given pride of place in global narratives over similar textiles traded to East Africa or Central Asia.⁵⁶ One might say that the study of material culture has so far been unable to disenfranchise itself from established spatial narratives that for the early modern period privilege maritime (e.g., as already noted, by the European East India companies) over land exchange, and the horizontal movement from east to west over that of vertical axes from south to north.⁵⁷ This article has no solution to this problem, though in the next section it considers some of the ways in which world and global historians might use material culture to re-think the spaces of the global.

THE SPACES OF THE GLOBAL

Daniel Lord Smail and Andrew Shryock’s provocative manifesto for a deep history is a warning of the danger of things. “Consider a shell bead from Europe around 40,000 years ago,” they state, “a shell that was collected, drilled, strung with other beads onto a necklace, and then worn for some of the same reasons that anyone wears a necklace today: to display a thing of beauty; to enjoy the pleasures of collecting; to

⁵⁵ Robert Finlay, “The Pilgrim Art: The Culture of Porcelain in World History,” *Journal of World History* 9, no. 2 (1998): 141–187. See also Zhao Bing, “Global Trade and Swahili Cosmopolitan Material Culture: Chinese-Style Ceramic Shards from Sanje ya Kati and Songo Mnara (Kilwa, Tanzania),” *Journal of World History* 23, no. 1 (2012): 41–85.

⁵⁶ Limited material evidence has survived for instance for the trade of Indian cottons to East Africa and Central Asia. See Pedro Machado, *Ocean of Trade: South Asian Merchants, Africa and the Indian Ocean, c. 1750–1850* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014); and Scott C. Levi, *The Indian Diaspora in Central Asia and its Trade, 1550–1900* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2002).

⁵⁷ A response to this issue can be found in Jagjeet Lally, *India and the Silk Roads: The History of a Trading World* (London: Hurst & Company, 2021), esp. ch. 5: “Material Culture.”

communicate status, taste, and fashion; to signal belonging; to add value to an object to generate power by giving or trading.”⁵⁸ Smail and Shryock warn us against the “eerie familiarity” of things that might contribute to making archaeologists’ interpretations intelligible, but create a storytelling based more on our assumptions than real facts. Fast forward 39,500 years and a similar problem might be found in the ways in which we infer histories of global connectivity from things. Historians are not archeologists: they rarely dig out their material evidence; instead they mobilize it in their historical narratives in ways that might puzzle archaeologists. While the latter construct theories through evidence (and might occasionally as Smail and Shryock claim, empathize too much with their object of study), historians often use material evidence to support theories and suppositions that have been constructed elsewhere, and most especially in the archive. As I argued elsewhere, for the global historian the issue is not whether material culture can be used to provide proof of global connectivity.⁵⁹ The real value of material culture is that of articulating our spatial understanding of the past in ways that are not necessarily apparent in documentary sources, and through concepts that were not even recognized or understood by people of a particular time. Things, artefacts, luxuries, and commodities were not the embodiment of an extraneous system of connections; they created themselves global spaces and therefore are “actants,” to borrow Bruno Latour’s terminology.⁶⁰ I focus on four different ways in which objects might help us to reflect on the spaces of the global.⁶¹

Tim Brook’s *Vermeer’s Hat* is an accessible and wonderfully engaging book based on vignettes created from single Vermeer paintings that show us how the seventeenth-century master’s choices of

⁵⁸ Daniel Lord Smail and Andrew Shryock, “History and the ‘Pre’ . . .,” *The American Historical Review* 118, no. 3 (2013): 711–712.

⁵⁹ Giorgio Riello, “Global Things: Europe’s Early Modern Material Transformation,” in *The Routledge Handbook of Material Culture*, ed. Gaimster, Hamling, and Richardson, 29–45.

⁶⁰ Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2005).

⁶¹ For a wider methodological analysis of types of connectivity and material culture, see: Riello, “Global Things;” Glenn Adamson and Giorgio Riello, “Global Objects: Contention and Entanglement,” in *Writing the History of the Global*, ed. Maxine Berg (Oxford: Oxford University Press and The British Academy, 2013), 177–193; and Giorgio Riello, “Objects in Motion: Mobility, Connectivity and the Imaginary in Early Modern Global Things,” in *Encounters at Sea: Paper, Objects and Sentiments in Motion Across the Mediterranean*, exhibition catalogue by Giovanni Tarantino, Giorgio Riello, and José María Pérez Fernández (Florence: Bandecchi & Vivaldi, 2020), 31–40.

props reflected the cosmopolitan world of his Dutch contemporaries.⁶² One can see beaver from North America, porcelain and silks from China, pearls from the Indian Ocean, and European maps of the world. Here the global is conveyed within the space of a single “cosmopolitan space”: a room, or the space of a Dutch city. The armchair travelers of the seventeenth century could rely on the Dutch East India Company (VOC) and West India Company (GWC) to bring the world to their homes. Their understanding of the origins, cultural value, and even function of things might be quite different from those who produced them. This is also a global space that is extremely local: the scene set in Delft suggests that mobility and connectivity is at the service of the locality. Yet even a confined space such as that represented by Vermeer has a vast horizon. Early modern Europeans were keen to convey their cosmopolitanism in cabinets of curiosities, still lives with objects from Asia and the Americas, and in their “multicultural” interiors increasingly shaped by porcelain, textiles, and furniture imported by the East India Companies. We are left to wonder whether this self-promoted cosmopolitanism was only distinctively European or whether other routes such as for instance the long-standing central Asian silk roads could produce similar phenomena in India, China, and elsewhere.

Each of the artefacts and commodities represented by Vermeer have their own stories. Kopytoff calls it a cultural biography of things.⁶³ One of the advantages of following the physical movement of material artefacts—in a similar fashion to following the movement of travelers—is that the geographic remit of what is considered is not predetermined. An example is this beautiful box produced from a rare Seychelles nut, the fruit of a palm called *Lodoicea seychellarum*, best known as “coco de mer” (Figure 5a). These types of artefacts are to be found in European *kunstammer*, since in the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries they were collected as rarities. It was not uncommon to transform a piece of *naturalia* into an artefact by adding both functional and decorative parts in precious metals. The spatial circulation of this object is visible on its very own fabric: an object of collecting practices in Europe, its central silver band was added in Goa where natural objects like these were transformed into artefacts and

⁶² Timothy Brook, *Vermeer’s Hat: The Seventeenth Century and the Dawn of the Global World* (London: Profile, 2009).

⁶³ Igor Kopytoff, “The Cultural Biography of Things: Commodification as Process,” in *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*, ed. Arjun Appadurai (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 64–94.



FIGURE 5A. Seychelles nut box. Silver mount: Goa, seventeenth century; feet added in Europe in the eighteenth century.
Source: Courtesy of the Távora Sequeira Pinto Collection, Porto, Portugal.

sourced for wealthy European collectors. The feet were added in the eighteenth century in Europe. Because of its rarity, seventeenth-century European accounts thought this nut to be growing underwater rather than on trees, as is the case in two islands of the Seychelles.⁶⁴ This is an early form of “entangled object”—to use Thomas Nicholas terminology—an artefact that took shape by moving in space and over a long chronology, suggesting that the connectivity and spatiality of the early modern world was both

⁶⁴ The late sixteenth-century Italian merchant and traveller Francesco Carletti recounts to have seen what he called “Maldiva coconuts” in Goa, “which are not found elsewhere. They are grown in the depths of the sea of those islands, and from there are thrown up on the shore, where they are found. In shape they are two nuts joined together, and they are longer by two times than the black cocos, but more solid.” Francesco Carletti, *My Voyage Around the World*, trans. Herbert Weinstock (London: Methuen, 1965), 225.

flexible and incremental in time.⁶⁵ This artefact puts into contact the little-known space of the Seychelles, the flourishing Portuguese entrepôt of Goa in India, and the world of European courts, crisscrossing spaces that are often considered hermetically sealed. There was also nothing unidirectional in the path taken by this object. Cocos de mer were also used in Persia by Sufis as begging bowls (kashkul). While Sufis disavow most material objects, the kashkul is one of the very few items that a dervish would keep on his person (Figure 5b).⁶⁶ Like in Europe, in Persia these functional bowls were later mounted to highlight their value.

The presence of the same type of rare artefacts in two different world geographies provides insights on the specificity of processes of commodification of the natural world, of trade, attribution of value, and the religious and cultural functions of artefacts. It also subverts established notions of connectivity that emphasize the role played by Europe in the shaping of global processes. Recent scholarship has used artefacts to investigate the relationship between the global and the local. The global trade of luxuries and commodities came to reshape local economies in places such as India and China. This was the case of entire Indian villages weaving cloth for international markets. Anne Gerritsen considers the space of the city of Jingdezhen in the Jiangxi province of China that for nearly a thousand years produced blue-and-white and other types of porcelain for global markets.⁶⁷ Notwithstanding being located nearly a thousand km north of the port of Canton, thanks to its dragon kilns, the landlocked “city of porcelain” of Jingdezhen became the pulsing center for the production of artefacts traded worldwide well before the arrival of the European companies.

Histories of trade of the premodern world have underlined the importance of porcelain and textiles and their worldwide circulation. Yet they need to be qualified in two ways: first in the geographies of

⁶⁵ Nicholas Thomas, *Entangled Objects: Exchange, Material Culture, and Colonialism in the Pacific* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991). For the adoption of a similar methodological approach to the study of the famous Molino Ewer, see: Marta Ajmar-Wollheim and Luca Molà, “The Global Renaissance: Cross-cultural Objects in the Early Modern Period,” in *Global Design History*, ed. Glenn Adamson, Giorgio Riello, and Sarah Teasley (New York: Routledge, 2011), 11–24.

⁶⁶ An empty kashkul represents the voiding of the ego, which is required of a dervish before he can nourish himself with divine knowledge. <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/445960?&searchField=All&sortBy=Relevance&ft=coco+de+mer&offset=0&rpp=20&pos=3>.

⁶⁷ Anne Gerritsen, *The City of Blue and White: Chinese Porcelain and the Early Modern World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020). See also the special issue on “Global China: Material Culture and Connections in World History,” ed. Anne Gerritsen and Stephen McDowall, *Journal of World History* 23, no. 1 (2012).



FIGURE 5B. Begging bowl. Dated A.H. 1130/A.D. 1717-18. Persian.
Source: Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

exchange that they narrate and second in the actual material evidence that they use. On the latter point, it seems obvious that artefacts are important even when they are not beautiful museum pieces. Yet, historians do not make as much use of shards or textile fragments as they do of museum-quality artefacts. The small shards of broken vessels and cups that have been excavated in different parts of the world are very useful for global historical analyses. Archaeological surveys have revised our view of trade and material connection in the early modern period, mostly away from Europe. Thinly glazed porcelain cups of the Wan-li period (1572–1620) were unearthed during the archaeological survey of Jamestown in Virginia. They are a very small percentage of the 150,000 objects recovered from the site that include coins, decorative items, furnishing, potteries, and residue of food. Yet remains of a dozen Chinese porcelain cups show that at its very foundation in 1607–1610 Chinese artefacts were part of the material fabric of Jamestown.⁶⁸ There is no certain proof but the Chinese cups found in Jamestown might be connected with similar porcelain shards unearthed at San Gabriel del Yunque, present-day New Mexico, that in the early seventeenth century was New Spain’s far north settlement.⁶⁹ These remnants help us reframe established histories of material exchange. They bring renewed attention to the Pacific, in particular in connection to the Manila to Acapulco route opened in the 1570s through which thousands of pieces of porcelain and chinaware reached Mexico. Recent works have shown the profound links between the Spanish Empire in the Americas, and China and Japan.⁷⁰ Yet, the shards in San Gabriel and in Jamestown alert us to the importance of considering what we might call the “accessibility” and “penetration” of Chinese objects even in rather remote parts of the rising Spanish empire and English colonies.

⁶⁸ Giorgio Riello, “Things that Shape History: Material Culture and Historical Narratives,” in *History and Material Culture*, ed. Karen Harvey (London: Routledge, 2009), 34.

⁶⁹ Donna Pierce, “Popular and Prevalent: Asian Trade Goods in Northern New Spain, 1590–1850,” *Colonial Latin American Review* 25, no. 1 (2016): 78.

⁷⁰ *Asia & Spanish America: Trans-Pacific and Cultural Exchange, 1500–1800*, ed. Donna Pierce and Ronald Otsuka (Denver: Denver Art Museum, 2009); Id., *At the Crossroads: The Arts of Spanish America and Early Global Trade, 1492–1850* (Denver: Denver Art Museum, 2012); *Global Goods and the Spanish Empire, 1492–1824*, ed. Bethany Aram and Bartolomé Yun-Casalilla (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014); Priyadarshini, *Chinese Porcelain*; José Luis Gasch-Tomás, *The Atlantic World and the Manila Galleons: Circulation, Market, and Consumption of Asian Goods in the Spanish Empire, 1565–1650* (Leiden: Brill, 2019).

Artefacts can also be used to revise our understanding of distance, not just geographical but also cultural.⁷¹ Material culture studies consider the poly-semantic value of “things”: their function to either bridge or reinforce cultural gaps, their value in creating strangeness and familiarity, and at gazing at other cultures, often unknown in the premodern world through verbal or written means. Global historians are increasingly asked to reflect on what people at the time made of such global phenomena, how they perceived, understood, and often misunderstood the world around them.⁷² Once the terrain of intellectual historians and historians of ideas, material culture now provides a means of reflection on how the global was constructed not just through concepts, models, and thoughts but also through materiality. This oblong faience tile panel produced in the Netherlands circa 1690–1730 now at the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam shows a Chinese landscape (Figure 6).

The goddess Guan Yin is shown sitting on a lotus flower and enveloped by a yellow sun. Scholarship on the history of print and the history of design has established that Chinese prints were available in the seventeenth-century Dutch Republic and were probably used as a source for earthenware decoration such as this. A number of smaller scenes are also depicted below. The dark figures on the panels are clearly South American, based on the clothing and feather regalia, which is typical of the Amazon region. They are based on illustrations from Arnoldus Montanus’ 1671 description of America.⁷³ Here Asia and the Americas come together in a blending of motifs. The object shows an act of transposition to text and image, and from image to artefact. This is also an act of inventiveness, of construction of spaces that are not real but revelatory of the ways in which contemporaries perceived and categorized them. The Delft artist’s decision to make the figures darker may be linked to the fact that porcelain was long thought to have been made from white cowrie shells, which were natural objects associated with Africa.⁷⁴ Whatever the explanation is, the value of an

⁷¹ Anne Gerritsen and Giorgio Riello, “Spaces of Global Interactions: The Material Landscapes of Global History,” in *Writing Material Culture History*, ed. Gerritsen and Riello, 123–142.

⁷² Ayesha Ramachandran, *The Worldmakers: Global Imagining in Early Modern Europe* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2015).

⁷³ Arnoldus Montanus, *De Nieuwe en Onbekende Weereld: of beschryving van America en 't Zuid-Land* (Amsterdam: Jacob Meurs, 1671), 158 and 440. For a facsimile edition see: <https://www.s4ulanguages.com/marcgrave-montanus.html>.

⁷⁴ *Asia in Amsterdam: The Culture of Luxury in the Golden Age*, ed. Karina H. Corrigan, Jan van Campen, and Femke Diercks, with Janet C. Blyberg (Amsterdam: Rijksmuseum, 2015), cat. nr. 93. I thank Karina Corrigan and her colleagues at the Peabody Essex Museum for their help with the analysis of this important artefact. On this artefact see also Benjamin Schmidt, “Inventing Exoticism: The Project of Dutch Geography and the Marketing of the World, circa 1700,” in *Merchants and Marvels*, ed. Smith and Findlen, 354.



FIGURE 6. Tile panel with a Chinese landscape, anonymous. Delft ca. 1700. Earthenware, h 171.3 cm × w 79.9 cm × d 4.5 cm. Source: Rijksmuseum, Gift of the heirs of J.F. Loudon, The Hague, BK-NM-12400-443.

object like this lies in its ability to show how the very concept of connection is far from monolithic and in the early modern period, as today, assumed different forms.

Material objects have a fascinating power: they convey stories, raise unknown aspects, and lead us to ask open questions that defy easy disciplinary, thematic, and chronological divides. Yet it is worth highlighting that commodities, luxuries, and artefacts can also reproduce established tropes of what we might call a “Whig interpretation of global history.” While the gravest danger of falling into a teleology of increasing connectivity is most often avoided, this is not the case when we consider the type of connectivity at stake. Most often than not, artefacts lead us to highlight positive and enriching connections—those of embassies, of trade, of cultural exchange and of conspicuous consumption—rather than the negative outcomes of connection: oppression, coercion, and obliteration that characterize instead modern narratives of empire, the rise of capitalism, and environmental exploitation. To recover those narratives historians need to read objects “against the grain” and integrate them with visual and written sources. This is the case of the history of slavery whose material legacy remains limited and complex in its interpretation. The Black Lives Matter movement has highlighted the discrepancy between the abundance of statues and public monuments dedicated to slave traders, plantation owners, and those who supported or profited from slavery and the paucity of artefacts related to enslaved people, their experience, and sufferings. The material legacy of colonialism is equally challenging especially for Western museums that have to acknowledge the very acts of violence that brought artefacts into their collections as for instance the Benin bronzes in many British museums. These are contested artefacts whose restitution claims far too often fall on deaf ears.⁷⁵ Their histories alert us to the unequal exchange that existed between colonizers and colonized, between assailants and the attacked, and between the Imperial West and other parts of the world.

Equally complex is the use of material methodologies for the analysis of disconnection. As the world was reshaped in both locality and globality, many areas either remained unaffected by global forces and processes or were newly excluded from it. The old paradigm of the

⁷⁵ Dan Hicks, *The British Museums: The Benin Bronzes, Colonial Violence and Cultural Restitution* (London: Pluto, 2020). And on museum and their colonial legacy, see: Alice Procter, *The Whole Picture: The Colonial Story of the Art in Our Museums and Why We Need to Talk About It* (London: Cassell, 2021).

“European expansion,” for instance, is still with us when we emphasize horizontal connectivity across oceans (the Atlantic, the Indian, and the Pacific) and ignore instead vertical connections (for instance between the southern part of Asia and the Central Asia steppes). While material culture might be indeed a way to recover little known spatial ties in the early modern world, the same cannot be said of places that might have been “cut off” (at least from European connectivity) as in the case of the Central Asian silk roads.⁷⁶

A GLOBAL MICROHISTORY OF THINGS

Material culture can be used as a tool to write global histories that are more nuanced in their understanding of space/place and of the relationship between the local and the global. Yet the recent attention given to what is now called “global microhistory” points to the renewed importance of the methodologies of global history and the role of people and agency in narratives of global change.⁷⁷ Inspired by the work of Italian microhistorians, global historians appreciate the potential of using microhistorical methodologies to illuminate the micro as well as the macro. This is work in progress that already shows that global microhistory might have as many variants and varieties as microhistory had in the 1970s and 1980s.⁷⁸

Earlier iterations of global microhistory paid attention to the lives of individuals who crossed geographic as well as cultural boundaries. Rather than narrate birds’ eye views of history, the experiences of transcultural agents such as Leo Africanus or unlikely protagonists such as Elizabeth Marsh provide a more personal, manageable, and, most of all, more intimate way to read broad global narratives.⁷⁹ This methodology has shown an ability to recover human agency, provide greater sophistication, and foster identification in otherwise nameless

⁷⁶ See Lally’s path-breaking analysis of the connection between India and central Asia: Lally, *India and the Silk Roads*, ch. 5.

⁷⁷ Francesca Trivellato, “Is There a Future to Italian Microhistory in the Age of Global History?” *California Italian Studies* 2, no. 1 (2011).

⁷⁸ “Micro-analyse et histoire globale,” ed. Romain Bertrand and Guillaume Calafat, issue of *Annales HSS* 73, no. 1 (2018); “Global History and Microhistory,” ed. John-Paul Ghobrial, special issue of *Past & Present* 242, supplement 14 (2019).

⁷⁹ Natalie Zemon Davis, *Trickster Travels: A Sixteenth-Century Muslim between Worlds* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2006); Linda Colley, *The Ordeal of Elizabeth Marsh: A Woman in World History* (London: Harper Press, 2007). See also Miles Ogborn, *Global Lives: Britain and the World, 1550–1800* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

processes of global change.⁸⁰ Yet the simple transposition of this methodology from people to things is less straightforward than one might imagine. There are at least three (and indeed there might be more) ways of conceiving a “global microhistory of things.” The first is to retain the focus on human actors and use “the material” as a way to characterize their global outlook. Can we reconstruct the material world of a (global) person?⁸¹ Two recent examples of this approach are an exhibition and catalogue, and a monograph, respectively. The first is the reconstruction of Margrieta Van Varick who was born in the Netherlands, but spent most of her life in the Dutch colonial world, first in Malacca and later in Flatbush (present-day Brooklyn). Having no surviving artefacts belonging to Van Varick, the inventory of her goods has been used to reconstruct her material world but also the world she lived in.⁸² Different from traditional approaches to the reconstruction of domestic or professional spaces and the material possessions of people, an inventory has been used here to qualify global connectivity and address the meaning of cosmopolitanism spacing across three continents through subjective experience.⁸³ A similar approach has been adopted by Elizabeth Lambourn in her *Abraham’s Luggage*. This study reconstructs the trading goods and personal possessions of the twelfth-century merchant Abraham ben Yijū whose commercial activities and life spanned the Mediterranean, the Red Sea, and the Western Indian Ocean.⁸⁴ I call this approach “ego-things” as material artefacts are used as traces to reconstruct global lives and address a series of themes, not least religion, family, and gender.⁸⁵ Objects are here used to fill those unavoidable voids created by the

⁸⁰ See more recently John-Paul A. Ghobrial, “The Secret Life of Elias of Babylon and the Uses of Global Microhistory,” *Past & Present* 222 (2014): 51–94; Dominic Sachsenmaier, *Global Entanglements of a Man Who Never Traveled: A Seventeenth-century Chinese Christian and His Conflicted Worlds* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018).

⁸¹ Rarer are studies on the collective global material culture of groups of people. A brilliant example is Beverly Lemire, “‘Men of the World’: British Mariners, Consumer Practice, and Material Culture in an Era of Global Trade, c. 1660–1800,” *Journal of British Studies* 54, no. 2 (2015): 288–319.

⁸² Deborah Krohn, Peter N. Miller, and Marybeth De Filippis, *Dutch New York, between East and West: The World of Margrieta Van Varick* (New York: Bard Graduate Center and the New York Historical Society, 2009).

⁸³ On the use of probate inventories and their importance for the study of material culture, see: Giorgio Riello, “‘Things Seen and Unseen’: The Material Culture of Early Modern Inventories and their Representation of Domestic Interiors,” in *Early Modern Things*, ed. Findlen, 125–150.

⁸⁴ Elizabeth Lambourn, *Abraham’s Luggage: A Social Life of Things in the Medieval Indian Ocean World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018).

⁸⁵ *Gender and Material Culture in Britain since 1600*, ed. Hannah Greig, Jane Hamlett, and L. Hannan (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015); Merry Wiesner-Hanks, “Early Modern

silence of sources in the same way in which anthropological methodologies have done in micro-history.

As noted by Romain Bertrand and Guillaume Calafat in their analysis of global micro-history, to follow an actor “leads the historian to question situations that are unfamiliar, that is to say little documented and rarely mentioned with the same fanfare of those that commonly emerge from the tales of public history.”⁸⁶ One might follow their line of thought and consider material things as tools to address the “little documented” or to provide lateral thinking in historical research. I call these “situational things,” as the material is mobilized to provide a new perspective on historical events and occasions that often transcend specific individuals. Objects, for instance, can be seen as active agents in the structuring of familial bonds of the connected lives of imperial families living in Britain, North America, and India in the eighteenth century as studied by Margot Finn and Emma Rothschild.⁸⁷ These studies use “assemblages of things” to reflect on distance, memory, emotions, and loss in the everyday life of subjects who did not just promote empire and its ideology but had to negotiate the difficulty of structuring family and affections across geographic and cultural distance.⁸⁸ Rather than seeing empire as a monolithic political and economic project that opposes colonizers and colonized, and core and periphery, the material allows us to use different scales of analysis and considers friendship, family ties, and the everyday in global history, opening new possibilities for comparative work across time and space.⁸⁹ This is achieved on an imperial scale and from the perspective of British colonists and servants

Gender and the Global Turn,” in *Mapping Gendered Routes and Spaces in the Early Modern World*, ed. Merry Wiesner-Hanks (Burlington: Ashgate, 2015), 55–74.

⁸⁶ Romain Bertrand and Guillaume Calafat, “La microhistoire globale: affaire(s) à suivre,” *Annales HSS* 73, no. 1 (2018): 14.

⁸⁷ Margot Finn, “Anglo-Indian Lives in the Later Eighteenth Century,” *Journal for Eighteenth-Century Studies* 33, no. 1 (2010): 49–65; *The East India Company at Home, 1757–1857*, ed. Margot Finn and Kate Smith (London: ULC Press, 2018); and Emma Rothchilds, *The Inner Life of Empires: An Eighteenth-Century History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011). See also Elizabeth Kuebler-Wolf, “‘Born in America, in Europe Bred, in Africa Travell’d and in Asia Wed’: Elihu Yale, Material Culture, and Actor Networks from the Seventeenth Century to the Twenty-first,” *Journal of Global History* 11, no. 2 (2016): 320–343.

⁸⁸ On the idea of assemblages of things, see Ethan W. Lasser, “Review of *The Power of Objects in Eighteenth-century British America*, by Jennifer Van Horn,” *Art Bulletin* 101, no. 2 (2019): 143.

⁸⁹ This is for instance the case of Tsuneno, the main character in Stanley’s scholarship who is unable to find work because of her wardrobe, a situation well known to her contemporaries in Europe. Amy Stanley, “Maid-servants’ Tales: Narrating Domestic and Global History in Eurasia, 1600–1900,” *The American Historical Review* 121, no. 2 (2016):

of the East India companies: these examples raise useful questions for us to think about the history of emotions in a global framework of analysis. There is now substantial literature on the intersection between emotions and material culture at a local and national level as well as studies of the emotional entanglements with materiality for migrant and diasporic communities.⁹⁰ Yet, the recovery of what I would define as a global “emotional palette” for the premodern period suffers from a profound lack of suitable material as well as written sources.

While the person remains central to the concerns of global microhistorians, historians of art and museum experts are well acquainted with the construction of what we might call “it-narratives,” taking the object as central and thus making it a historical subject.⁹¹ Historians instead have mostly followed Igor Kopytoff’s “cultural biography of things,” though such an approach tends to be still shaped through generic categories in works on textiles (cotton and silk), wood, silver, but also coral, rhubarb, etc.⁹² Moreover, the similitude between the biography of people and those of things can be misleading for the very reason that as history cannot be reduced to the biography of individuals, so material culture should not collapse into the biography of things. Rather than biography, in the case of material things I prefer “palimpsest,” a term used to denote a manuscript on which later writing has been superimposed on effaced earlier writing. Things *are* palimpsests as their materiality is continuously reshaped, modified, and even deleted. They also *have* palimpsests as their “lives” unfold in

437–460; and Id., *Stranger in the Shogun’s City: A Japanese Woman and Her World* (New York: Scribner, 2020).

⁹⁰ See for instance *Moving Subjects, Moving Objects: Transnationalism, Cultural Production and Emotions*, ed. Maruška Svašek (New York and Oxford: Bergham Books, 2012). For broader methodological discussions, see: Ulinka Rublack, “Fluxes: The Early Modern Body and the Emotions,” *History Workshop Journal* 53, no. 1 (2002): 1–16; “AHR Conversation: The Historical Study of Emotions,” *The American Historical Review* 117, no. 5 (2012): 1487–1531; Kim Siebenhüner, “Things that Matter. Zur Geschichte der materiellen Kultur in der Frühnezeitforschung,” *Zeitschrift für Historische Forschung* 42, no. 3 (2015): 373–409; *Feeling Things: Objects and Emotions through History*, ed. Stephanie Downes, Sally Holloway, and Sarah Randles (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2018).

⁹¹ Yet notwithstanding much debate about the “agency of things,” for historians there are substantial differences between human beings and inanimate artefacts. This also includes a more fruitful debate on “animal history” and the agency of animals; discussions on Anthropocene and the division between humankind and nature. On the contours of “material culture,” see: Leora Auslander, “Beyond Words,” *The American Historical Review* 110, no. 4 (2006): 1015–1044; and Dana Leibsohn, “Broken Saints, House Cats, Other Historical matter,” in *Writing Material Culture History*, ed. Gerritsen and Riello, 20–27.

⁹² Kopytoff, “Cultural Biography of Things.” For a critique see Anne Gerritsen and Giorgio Riello, “Introduction,” in *Writing Material Culture History*, ed. Gerritsen and Riello, 10–11.

dynamics and temporalities that are neither linear nor human. It is the mercurial nature of things that make them particularly interesting for historians. They can, for instance, obviate the problem that “historical actors at the time would have been only rarely in a position to realize the magnitude and extension of those same [global] networks.”⁹³ Things can capture dynamics that were either misunderstood or not entirely articulated by contemporaries. Because of their re-contextualization across time, material artefacts serve also to rethink the cultural importance of specific events, people, and narratives.⁹⁴ Through artefacts, Braudel’s “material life” approach finds new themes, topics, and methodologies that resonate with global history. Away from dwellings, individual possessions, and personal practices, a “global material life” reflects instead on the entanglement of materiality, human agency, and global processes of change.⁹⁵

This is the case for instance of ships. Of fundamental importance in global maritime routes, the transport of goods, people, and information in the premodern world and up until the twentieth century, ships remain little studied beyond histories of technologies charting their different types and technical solutions. They were instead “moving microcosms” that for months—and sometime years—traveled across oceans bringing together people and goods from different corners of the world. Their materiality was continuously reshaped as it is estimated that within thirty-six months most parts of a vessel had to be replaced. These “palimpsests of the sea” were the stage of revolts and mutinies, of contagious outbreaks, of language learning (as long voyages served to acquire linguistic expertise), and of terrible suffering as in the case of ships deployed in the slave trade. Often seen as tools of globalization, ships were not just a means of transport for moving intercontinentally, they were intrinsically part of the experience of the global in the premodern period, they shaped people’s perspective of space, place, and connectivity.⁹⁶ They are today among the most fascinating research projects that bring together archaeologists, historians, museum curators, surveyors, conservators, and archivists in the study of existing

⁹³ Eugenio Menegon, “Telescope and Microscope: A Micro-historical Approach to Global China in the Eighteenth Century,” *Modern Asian Studies* 54, no. 4 (2020): 1320.

⁹⁴ As brilliantly shown by Stefan Hanß in his analysis of the Sant Crist Le Lepant across more than four centuries. Stefan Hanß, “Objects that Made History: A Material Microhistory of the Sant Crist Le Lepant, Barcelona, 1571–2017,” *Forum Kritische Archäologie* 7 (2018): 18–46.

⁹⁵ See for instance Ulinka Rublack, “Befeathering The European: The Matter of Feathers in the Material Renaissance,” *American Historical Review* 126, no. 1 (2021): 19–53.

⁹⁶ *Oceanic Histories*, ed. David Armitage, Alison Bashford, and Sujit Sivasundaram (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 9–13.

vessels such as the famous *Vasa* in Stockholm (built 1626–1628), the sixteenth-century *Mary Rose* now in Portsmouth, UK, and *La Belle* now in Victoria, Texas (built 1684). While none of these were trade ships, maritime archeology has unearthed remarkable shipwrecks and their cargoes.⁹⁷ This is the case for instance of the VOC vessel *Batavia* that in 1629 sunk off the coast of Western Australia leading to a mutiny and a massacre among its 300 survivors.⁹⁸

The study of shipwrecks alerts us to the fact that much research on global material culture goes beyond the field of history. Archaeology has provided extremely important findings.⁹⁹ The study of the world trade of ceramics and porcelain, for instance, can rely on impressive archaeological findings ranging from the above-mentioned North American digs to maritime archaeology. This is the case of the ninth-century Tang Shipwreck now displayed at the Museum of Asian Civilizations in Singapore from which more than a thousand pieces of ceramics, gold, and silver were recovered.¹⁰⁰ Equally important is the cargo of the *Esmeralda* and the *São Pedro*, vessels making up Vasco da Gama's second voyage to India, which were wrecked in 1503 off the coast of Oman.¹⁰¹ On land, by comparison, recent archeological campaigns in China are changing our understanding of textile techniques and tools, thus re-writing world histories of technologies and their chronological unfolding. Such finds also include documents: the eleventh- and twelfth-century fragments forming the so-called Cairo Genizah documents have been known for over a century and

⁹⁷ It is estimated that in their 300 years of activity 200–220 vessels of the English East India Company and 246 of the Dutch VOC were lost around the world. R. Lam, "Shipwrecks of the Honourable East India Company around the World," *International Journal of Nautical Archaeology* 19, no. 1 (1990): 13. See also D. H. Keith, and T. L. Carrell, "Going, Going, Gone: Underwater Cultural Resources in Decline," in *International Handbook of Historical Archaeology*, ed. David Gaimster and Teresita Majewski (New York: Springer, 2009), 105–139.

⁹⁸ While the wreck is a diving destination, a replica of the ship was built in the 1990s. Excavated items are on display at the Western Australian Museum. On the mutiny and massacre see Mike Dash, *Batavia's Graveyard* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2002).

⁹⁹ See for instance *Historical Archaeology in South Africa: Material Culture of the Dutch East India Company at the Cape*, ed. Carmel Schrire (Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast Press, 2014).

¹⁰⁰ For an overview of the findings see: <https://www.acm.org.sg/galleries>. This was also a controversial and highly disputed salvage operation part of commercial maritime archaeology.

¹⁰¹ Tânia Manuel Casimiro, "Material Culture from the Al Hallaniyah Island Early 16th-century Portuguese Indiaman Wreck-site," *International Journal of Nautical Archaeology* 47, no. 1 (2018): 182–202.

have been the subject of one of the largest projects of conservation, transcription, and interpretation of over 250,000 documents.¹⁰²

Such large-scale projects require a variety of skills—including rare linguistic and paleographic training—that can only be accessed through team-work. The quest for collaborative research in global history is perceived as a utopic truism; yet the interdisciplinary nature of much material culture research and the size of the task mean that an increasing number of projects have been organized around concerted efforts. These take the shape of crowdsourcing research, experimental teaching, voluntary participation, and ad-hoc projects connected to museum re-displays and exhibitions.¹⁰³ The opening of permanent galleries have been stimuli for a re-think of museums’ collections and their re-contextualization in narratives of global change, trade, and economic and cultural exchange. This is the case for instance for the re-display of the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford (UK) where “Asian Crossroads” and “East meets West” orientation galleries served to reshape area collections within a broader global canvas.¹⁰⁴ Museums can also act as catalyzers for the re-interpretation of established historical narratives: Milan, for instance, is a northern Italian city whose history, in opposition to Venice or Florence, has been mostly narrated in regional and national terms. A recent initiative by the Museo delle Culture di Milano (MUDEC) led to the opening of a 8,000 sq. ft permanent exhibition showing the city’s role since 1500 as a key node of the Spanish empire, as a colonial and anti-colonial city and today as a multi-ethnic metropolis.¹⁰⁵ Several prominent exhibitions have inspired new research and influenced both the ways in which historians have conceptualized global history and how the wider public perceives global narratives.¹⁰⁶

¹⁰² Cambridge Digital Library – Cairo Genizah: <https://cudl.lib.cam.ac.uk/collections/genizah/1>; Jewish Virtual Library – Cairo Genizah: <https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/the-cairo-genizah>. Lambourn reconstructs the material world of the twelfth-century trader Abraham ben Yijū from the Cairo Genizah document. Lambourn, *Abraham’s Luggage*.

¹⁰³ Examples are: *De todas as partes do Mundo: O património do 5.º duque de Bragança*, D. Teodósio I, ed. Jessica Hallett and Nuno Senos (Lisbon: Tinta-da-China, 2018), the outcome of a research project on the inventory of the fifth Duke of Bragança; “The Making and Knowing Project,” coordinated by Pamela H. Smith at Columbia University: <https://www.makingandknowing.org/>; and Margot Finn and Kate Smith’s “The East India Company at Home”: <https://blogs.ucl.ac.uk/eicah/>.

¹⁰⁴ Ashmolean Museum, Oxford: <https://www.ashmolean.org/first-floor>.

¹⁰⁵ MUDEC, Milan: <https://www.mudec.it/ita/>.

¹⁰⁶ See for instance A. Jackson and Amin Jaffer, *Encounters: The Meeting of Asia and Europe, 1500–1800* (London: V&A Publications, 2004); D. J. Roxburgh, *Turks: A Journey of a Thousand Years, 600–1600* (London: Royal Academy of Arts, 2005); *Interwoven Globe: The Worldwide Textile Trade, 1500–1800*, ed. Amelia Peck (London: Thames & Hudson, 2013); James Bennett and Russell Keltz, *Treasure Ships: Art in the Age of Spices* (Adelaide: Art Gallery of South Australia, 2014). A decade ago, one of the most successful initiatives was Neil MacGregor’s BBC Radio program on “The History of the World in 100 Objects.” Neil MacGregor, *A History of the World in 100 Objects* (London: Allen Lane, 2010). See also Elizabeth Lambourn, “A History of the World in 100 Objects,” *Journal of Global History* 6, no. 3 (2011): 529–533.

CONCLUSION

Material culture presents several challenges as well as opportunities for global history. This article has surveyed the contours of what is called a “material turn” in global history by considering some of the key publications, projects, and museum initiatives over the past decade. Yet it has also presented an argument for the role of material culture in re-defining two aspects of global history. First, the material turn is a chance to reconsider the ways in which the field of global history conceptualizes space and most especially the connectivity that characterized the premodern world. I have put forward four different ways to think about global spaces according to typologies that are: “cosmopolitan,” “of distance,” “local vs global,” and “moving” through material entanglements. Second, as global history considers the ways in which the agency of individuals can have meaningful value in global narratives, “small things” might be used both as ways to challenge established narratives and to provide different scales of analysis that range from micro to macro. The “material turn” in global history has therefore the potential to contribute not just new themes and topics but also new perspectives and lenses through which to interpret global phenomena.

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