

Beyond terminology, or, the limits of 'decorative arts'

Deborah L. Krohn

George Kubler invites the reader to imagine a unified approach to the study of things in the first lines of his classic *The Shape of Time*, published in 1962: 'Let us suppose that the idea of art can be expanded to embrace the whole range of man-made things, including all tools and writing in addition to the useless, beautiful, and poetic things of the world.'¹ Following Kubler's suggestion, supposing, in this case, that all 'man-made things' fall under the category of art, then the distinction implied by the question, 'What is the role of the decorative arts within art historical discourse?' loses much of its force. I'd like to tweak this question, posed here by Christina Anderson and Catherine Futter, to read something like 'Do the various perspectives on cultural artefacts generated within material culture studies make the historical distinction between decorative arts and fine arts obsolete or redundant?'² I will look first at the history of the term 'decorative arts' and what it has come to mean as a field of academic study as well as a collecting area. I will then reflect on an exhibition that I co-organized at the Bard Graduate Center Gallery in 2013 as a case study in both the utility and limitations of the category of decorative arts in the current intellectual climate. At the heart of this discussion is a firm conviction that the exploration of the forms of cultural production that populate our environment must not be fragmented by arbitrary and ill-defined categories.

What is meant by the term 'decorative arts'? Attempts to define it are surprisingly few and far between. An anthology called *The Theory of Decorative Arts*, published in 2000, gathered a robust selection of critical texts spanning the mid-eighteenth to the mid-twentieth centuries, defining the term as 'a shorthand way of referring to all arts that, under various labels from the eighteenth century on, were excluded from the category of the fine arts (music, poetry, architecture, painting, and sculpture) but were seen to possess their own distinctive artistic properties.'³

¹ George Kubler, *The Shape of Time. Remarks on the History of Things*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1962, 1.

² This essay originated as a paper read at the College Art Association annual meeting in New York in 2013. I would like to thank Amy Ogata and Sarah Lawrence for their insightful comments on earlier drafts, as well as session chairs Christina Anderson and Catherine Futter for the invitation to speak.

³ Isabelle Frank, ed., *The Theory of Decorative Art*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, published for the Bard Graduate Center, 2000, xi.

As modes and materials of production of all forms of art evolved during and in the wake of the industrial revolution, its editor Isabelle Frank opined in her introduction, 'consumers and theorists alike searched for a way to evaluate the economic as well as aesthetic value of such protean arts.'⁴ The question that engendered the present essays comes in the wake of the continuing evolution of the categories and assumptions that undergird the field of art history. Notably, the intersection of material culture studies with art history and the history of design in the academic arena has pushed the question beyond simply defining the kinds of objects that are typically explored within the field of art history, coming closer to Kubler's notion of the 'whole range of man-made things', to re-shaping the varieties of evidence that are available to both the historian and curator. A full exploration of the history of material culture studies and its relationship with art and design history is beyond the purview of this essay, but it is an unavoidable corollary to the question posed by Anderson and Futter.⁵

What if, instead of theoretical writings, one were to examine a working definition of the Decorative Arts – capital D, capital A – turning to one of the most obvious sources? John Fleming and Hugh Honour's essential *Dictionary of the Decorative Arts* first appeared in 1977, a companion to the *Dictionary of Architecture*, which they co-authored with Nikolaus Pevsner in 1966.⁶ It is a general reference work and remains a dog-eared standard in many libraries.⁷ In its brief introductory note, Fleming and Honour explain the book's scope:

It is concerned with furniture and furnishings – i.e. movable objects other than paintings and sculpture – in Europe from the Middle Ages onwards and in North America from the Colonial Period to the present day. We have gone beyond these limits of place and time only in order to include accounts of craftsmen and types of objects that have played a part in the West, e.g. Chinese and Japanese ceramics.

⁴ Frank, *Theory*, 1.

⁵ On the relationship between art history and material culture, see the excellent discussion by Michael Yonan, 'Toward a Fusion of Art History and Material Culture Studies', *West 86th: A Journal of Decorative Arts, Design History, and Material Culture*, 18, no. 2, Fall–Winter 2011, 232–248. Yonan argues that material culture is not a methodology, '...but a meta-methodology, an ontological awareness that can inflect many critical techniques used to explain objects of all kinds.'

⁶ John Fleming and Hugh Honour, *Dictionary of the Decorative Arts*, New York: Harper and Row, 1977. A revised edition, published in 1989, omits the explanatory note altogether: *The Penguin Dictionary of Decorative Arts. New Edition*, London: Viking, 1989.

⁷ The 2013 *History of Design, Decorative Arts and Material Culture 1400 – 2000*, edited by Susan Weber and Pat Kirkham, and published by Yale University Press and Bard Graduate Center, is arguably a successor to Fleming and Honour and addresses many of the geographical areas and media that were categorically excluded from the 1977 *Dictionary*.

That is to say, borrowed materials, motifs, and techniques from non-Europeans are explored only as far as they have a presence in European contexts. The authors then set out their rationale for the chronological and geographical limits of the project, as well as the kinds of objects they address: 'movable objects other than paintings and sculpture.' Though this seems straightforward, the authors' assumption that both 'paintings' and 'sculpture' are self-evident categories is flawed. What about all of the paintings ON movable objects? Furniture painted with narrative scenes, such as the wooden panels that once adorned Italian Renaissance wedding chests or were embedded into interior architecture known as *cassoni* or *spalliere*, now masquerade as paintings in most museums. Their origin as elements of decorative art has been obscured by their re-contextualization in museum settings. The *Story of Esther* panel from a wedding chest now in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, where it is mounted in a modern frame and hung on the wall, is a prime example of this phenomenon.⁸ And what about sculptural furnishings, like the monumental ceramic vase created by Georges Hoentschel to adorn the façade of the pavilion he designed at the Paris *Exposition Universelle* of 1900? Standing at an imposing 45 inches high (115 centimetres), it appears to be composed of spectral marine creatures that ooze from the alluvial clay. (Fig. 1) Or the free-standing *torchères* that were common lighting instruments in eighteenth-century French palaces and are now on display as sculpture, devoid of their flames and smoke? The *Dictionary* continues: 'We have excluded articles of personal adornment, musical instruments, scientific instruments, and clocks (*but not their cases*), manuscripts and printed books (*but not their bindings.*)' In a university curriculum today that incorporates elements of material culture studies within art history, articles of personal adornment such as jewellery, costume, and dress are extremely popular areas of study, often serving



Figure 1 Georges Hoentschel (1855–1915), *Monumental vase*, French, ca. 1900, glazed stoneware. 45 $\frac{5}{8}$ x 22 $\frac{1}{2}$ x 24 $\frac{1}{8}$ in. (115.9 x 57.2 x 61.3 cm)
Marked on the rim of the foot with the entwined initials *GH*
The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Purchase, Iris and B. Gerald Cantor Foundation Gift, 2007 (2007.27)

⁸ *The Story of Esther*, Marco del Buono Giamberti (Italian, Florence 1402–1489 Florence) and Apollonio di Giovanni di Tomaso (Italian, Florence ca. 1416–1465 Florence). Tempera and gold on wood, 17 1/2 x 55 3/8 in. (44.5 x 140.7 cm). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Rogers Fund, 1918.

as important links between painted or imagined scenes, and social and cultural life. Far from being relegated to the basement, Fleming's and Honour's excluded categories now appear in mainstream museum contexts. A 2012 exhibition organized by the Art Institute of Chicago featured Impressionist paintings displayed side-by-side with clothing similar, and in some cases identical, to that portrayed in the familiar scenes of bourgeois leisure that characterize Impressionism.⁹ The conventional implication that the representation is a more significant cultural artefact (and more valuable in monetary terms) than the clothing itself was, perhaps inadvertently, turned on its head, as the craftsmanship and ingenuity of the garments took center stage. Though no one would argue that a dress or a hat is symbolically or literally equal to its painted reflection, especially when the painting is by a famous artist – that the thing in itself carries equal or greater value than its simulacrum – their juxtaposition in a traditional museum setting suggests an acknowledgment of the importance of material culture to the understanding of painting, and in this instance, to the development of modernism.

Similar arguments might be made for other types of objects mentioned by Fleming and Honour. A monographic exhibition in 2000 at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York devoted to the still-life paintings of Evaristo Baschenis (1617 – c. 1677) featured a clever re-creation in three dimensions of one work by the painter in which each individual object depicted was presented in a tableau in the gallery. The reassembled still life included musical instruments, ceramics, etc., offering a persuasive *paragone* in praise of the painter's skill in bringing them to life in two dimensions.¹⁰ As in the previous example concerning costume, though the implicit curatorial argument was that the paintings were, in the end, greater than the sum of their parts, the interplay between the objects themselves and their representations clearly enhanced the exhibition and suggested that the skill of crafting musical instruments was analogous to that of depicting them.

Of course, there are limits to what can be contained between the covers of a book, but even so, the breadth of the 1977 *Dictionary* seems now strikingly narrow given the way the study of decorative arts has evolved in the past 30 years or so. The history of furniture and furnishings has traditionally been the purview of decorative arts, if one looks at museum departments and their histories, but several of those other areas such as jewellery, dress and costume, and musical and scientific instruments, are now not only the object of museum exhibitions, but also of academic study in art history departments as well as in more interdisciplinary programs that attempt to bridge traditional boundaries between things and ideas, or, in Kubler's words, 'to embrace the whole range of man-made things.'¹¹

⁹ *Impressionism, Fashion and Modernity*, ed. Gloria Groom, Chicago: The Art Institute of Chicago, 2012.

¹⁰ *The Still-Lives of Evaristo Baschenis: The Music of Silence*, ed. Andrea Bayer, Milano: Olivares, 2000.

¹¹ Kubler, *Shape of Time*, 1.

Value – both material and symbolic – is central to the etiology of objects. Is it possible to consider the objects included under the rubric of decorative arts separate but equal? Or does the term continue to suggest an inferior realm of utilitarian or functional objects, of applied arts or *arti minori*, as it did as early as the sixteenth century? The concept is embedded within the larger historiography of art, and so it is useful to return to the Italian Renaissance to begin to understand its trajectory. Giorgio Vasari, in his Life of Dello Delli, from the 1568 edition of his *Lives*, explains that there were painters who considered the crafting of furniture and furnishings to be a secondary enterprise. Referring to painted *cassoni*, *spalliere* and other domestic furnishings, he writes:

And for many years this fashion was so much in use that even the most excellent painters exercised themselves in such labours, without being ashamed, as many would be to-day, to paint and gild such things. And that this is true has been seen up to our own day from some chests, chair-backs, and mouldings, besides many other things, in the apartments of the Magnificent Lorenzo de' Medici, the Elder, whereon there were painted – by the hand, not of common painters, but of excellent masters, and with judgment, invention, and marvellous art...¹²

Vasari is already historicizing this custom, stating that 'excellent painters' would be, in his own day, ashamed to paint and gild furniture, but that in the past this was done, and not only by 'common painters'. Though the materials and technique for painted furniture and what Fleming and Honour might call 'paintings' – tempera on wooden panel – were the same, the hierarchy of function trumped both the materials and the skill of the craftsmen in establishing the objects' status. Vasari's approach here is almost historiographic, telling the reader where these kinds of works might still be found in his own day:

Of such things relics are still seen, not only in the palace and the old houses of the Medici, but in all the most noble houses in Florence; and there are men who, out of attachment to these ancient usages, truly magnificent and most honourable, have not displaced these things in favour of modern ornaments and usages.¹³

Vasari is describing, essentially, the first collectors of furniture, even referring to the survivors as 'relics', explaining that it was rare, even then, to find examples still in situ. Without these early practices of collecting, there might be even fewer examples of Renaissance furniture today, though it is striking to realize how quickly – within

¹² Giorgio Vasari, *The Lives of the Most Eminent Sculptors, Painters and Architects*, trans. Gaston De C. de Vere, London: Philip Lee Warner, 1912-14, Vol. 2, 108.

¹³ Vasari, *Lives*, 108.

a couple of generations – interiors are deemed obsolete and are re-worked 'in favour of modern ornaments and usages', as Vasari states.¹⁴

Given the hierarchical attitude that Vasari displayed concerning furniture, it is not surprising to learn that he was a founder of one of the earliest artistic academies, the *Accademia delle Arti del Disegno*, in Florence in 1563. Building on the structure and function of earlier literary academies, one of the central thrusts of this academy was to provide an alternative to traditional craft guilds. From the middle ages, artists had belonged to guilds based on the materials they used rather than the techniques by which they created works of art. In fifteenth-century Florence, for example, many painters belonged to the guild of the doctors and apothecaries, the *medici e speziali*, since they used pigments made from substances that also had medicinal applications.¹⁵ From the mid-sixteenth century, academies for painters and sculptors influenced both artistic practice and protocols of training. Following the model of the *Accademia delli Arti del Disegno*, which counted many of the most important artists among its membership, other artistic academies were founded and flourished, cementing the hierarchy that valued art above craft: the *Accademia di San Luca* at the end of the sixteenth century in Rome; the French *Académie Royale de Peinture et Sculpture* in 1648; the Royal Academy in London in 1768; and so on. Devoted to the training of artists in the practice of painting, sculpture, and architecture, the academies also established the curriculum for the study of art history, privileging these forms of production over the creation of furniture and furnishings, still bound to traditional guild strictures in many parts of Europe through the eighteenth century. With the Enlightenment articulation of the fine arts as possessing their own theoretical and philosophical principles as distinct from the mechanical arts, the fate of the decorative arts was sealed.

The next chapter in this highly condensed story comprises the increasing separation between the so-called fine and decorative arts that emerged during the Industrial Revolution. The role of public collections and museums looms large in the institutionalization of the supporting role played by decorative arts. As a response to the rise of the industrial production of ceramics, textiles, furniture, and other furnishings, repositories of objects that had been excluded from the world of fine arts by both artistic academies, and by royal patrons as they amassed collections, began to take on a new importance as exemplars of good design and craftsmanship as well as bearers of national identity. In the influential writings of design reformers like John Ruskin or William Morris, they came to exemplify traditional handicraft, morally superior to the mass-produced factory products that

¹⁴ Vasari, *Lives*, 108.

¹⁵On the history of academies, see Nikolaus Pevsner's classic study, *Academies of Art, Past and Present*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1940. On the *Accademia del Disegno* in particular, see Karen-edis Barzman, *The Florentine Academy and the Early Modern State: the Discipline of Disegno*, New York; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000.

exploded onto the market from the late eighteenth century.¹⁶ The first public repositories of these objects grew out of world fairs, as in the Great Exhibition of 1851 in London, which in turn inspired the founding of the South Kensington Museum, now the Victoria and Albert, as well as related institutions such as, in Vienna, The Imperial Royal Austrian Museum of Art and Industry, now the *Museum für Angewandte Kunst* (MAK), founded in 1863.¹⁷ Both related projects, in London and Vienna, shared a nationalist agenda in the attempt to preserve market share in the production of luxury goods, and to forefront good design. Nationalist sentiment was also behind the establishment of repositories of traditional or vernacular arts such as the *Germanisches Nationalmuseum* in Nuremberg, founded in 1852 or *Skansen*, an open-air museum of vernacular architecture and design from the Scandinavian lands, in Stockholm, created in 1891.¹⁸ In Paris, the *Union Centrale des Arts Décoratifs* was founded by a coalition of wealthy industrialists and successful craftsmen in 1882 to ensure the pre-eminence of French furniture, textiles and other furnishings, and it was this entity that eventually created the *Musée des Arts Décoratifs* in 1900.¹⁹ In all of these venues, both historical and contemporary goods were displayed, outlining an alternative history of objects that was parallel to the history of fine art taught in art academies, where furniture and furnishings, to return to Fleming and Honour once again, continued to be excluded.

The academic field of art history only began to evolve in the early nineteenth century, first entering the university curriculum at Göttingen in 1813. At Princeton University, which counted two art historians in 1882 – classical and post-classical – furniture and furnishings were generally excluded, though it is worth mentioning that the founding collection of the Princeton Art Museum, then called the Museum of Historic Art and meant to supply objects for use in teaching, was the Trumbull-Prime Collection of Ceramics, accessioned in 1890, including pieces from ancient Egypt, Greece, and Peru as well as many examples of Asian and European

¹⁶ For a survey of design reform in the nineteenth century, see Nikolaus Pevsner, *Pioneers of Modern Design: From William Morris to Walter Gropius*, revised with an introduction by Richard Weston, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2005 (first published 1936).

¹⁷ On the V&A, see Anthony Burton, *Vision & Accident: The Story of the Victoria and Albert Museum*, London: V&A Publications, 1999. On the MAK, see *Kunst und Industrie: die Anfänge des Museums für Angewandte Kunst in Wien*, ed. Peter Noever with Hanna Egger, exhib. cat., Ostfildern-Ruit: G. Hatje, 2000.

¹⁸ On Nuremberg, see Bernward Deneke and Rainer Kashnitz, *Das Germanisches Nationalmuseum Nürnberg 1852 – 1977. Beiträge zu seiner Geschichte*, Munich and Berlin: Deutscher Kunstverlag, 1978. On Skansen, see Ralph Edenheim, *Skansen Traditional Swedish Style*, London: Scala Publications; Wappingers Fall, NY: The Antique Collectors' Club, 1995.

¹⁹ On this period in France, see Leora Auslander, *Taste and Power: Furnishing Modern France*, Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 1996; and Debora Silverman, *Art Nouveau in Fin-de-Siècle France: Politics, Psychology and Style*, Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1989.

porcelain.²⁰ But university programs that specialized in the study of the decorative arts or design did not exist before the second half of the twentieth century. Among the earliest to focus exclusively on furniture and furnishings was the Winterthur Program in American Material Culture and Decorative Arts, founded jointly with the University of Delaware in 1952. The Cooper-Hewitt/Parsons New School for Design Masters program celebrated its thirtieth anniversary in 2012, and the Bard Graduate Center, which awards the PhD as well as the MA, was established in 1993. The emergence of programs dedicated to the study of the decorative arts can be at least partially attributed to the overall expansion of the university curriculum in the mid-twentieth century to include the study of the oppressed and voiceless and frequently the textless: women, colonial peoples, queers, slaves, and so on. Like furniture and furnishings, frequently unsigned and uncelebrated, the only way to study members of society who did not leave a paper trail is through their material culture. The study of the decorative arts today, which includes much more than furniture and furnishings and embraces the categories of objects that Fleming and Honour excluded from their *Dictionary*, including costumes and textiles, jewellery and all kinds of machines (not just their cases) and graphic arts (not just their bindings), has outgrown the term. The adoption by some art historians of the more generous category of material culture to describe their practice is thus meant to be inclusive, to gather all of human cultural production under one big tent, beyond terminology.

An exhibition at the Bard Graduate Center, of which I was a co-curator together with Ulrich Leben and Daniëlle Kisluk-Grosheide, provided an illuminating opportunity for a case study of the life cycle of a group of furniture and furnishings, from domestic use, through the antiques and furniture market, to the museum, workshop, and finally, the classroom. The goal of *Salvaging the Past: Georges Hoentschel and French Decorative Arts from the Metropolitan Museum of Art* was to explore a large group of objects that John Pierpont Morgan had purchased from Georges Hoentschel, a colourful designer, architect, dealer, and collector, in 1906.²¹ Morgan, perhaps the most important American collector of the early twentieth century, did not buy the collection for himself, but rather for the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, of which he was, at the time, president.

²⁰ On this, see Marilyn Aronberg Lavin, *The Eye of the Tiger: The Founding and Development of the Department of Art and Archaeology, 1883- 1923*, Princeton University, Princeton: Department of Art and Archaeology and The Art Museum, 1983.

²¹ *Salvaging the Past: Georges Hoentschel and French Decorative Arts from the Metropolitan Museum of Art*, Daniëlle Kisluk-Grosheide, Deborah L. Krohn, and Ulrich Leben, eds, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2013. The exhibition was on view April 4 – August 11, 2013.

The collection is eclectic. Its high points include French medieval sculpture and objects, as well as furniture and panelling created by well-known cabinetmakers of the eighteenth century for French royal patrons. But much of the collection, including both Medieval and later material, consists of fragments and damaged or re-worked examples – essentially pieces of furnishings or interior architecture that were used by craftsmen in Hoentschel's atelier as models for decorating commissions – rather than prime examples of masterpieces.

Morgan envisioned the acquisition of the Hoentschel collection as a way of inaugurating a new initiative in the display of 'applied arts', inspired by European examples such as the South Kensington Museum in London or the *Musée des Arts Décoratifs* in Paris. In purchasing the entire collection rather than selecting the most important pieces, Morgan was attempting to create, in the words of the French curators who penned the lavish four-volume illustrated catalogue of the collection, 'the Museum of Decorative Arts of New York'.²² And since he gave the collection *en bloc* to the Museum, much of it has remained in storage, preserved as if in a time capsule, a testament not only of taste, but of process.

Hoentschel objects formed the nucleus of the Metropolitan Museum's Department of Decorative Arts, where they were intended to serve as a resource for craftsmen and designers who stood to benefit from the opportunity to view inspiring examples of French craftsmanship and design. No comparable collections were on public view in the United States at this time. Though the arts of the *Ancien Régime* were favoured by the gilded age patrons for their mansions in Newport, Rhode Island, and elsewhere, these homes remained private, seldom seen by ordinary people. At first, a selection of pieces from the Hoentschel collection was installed in a new wing of the Metropolitan designed by George F. McKim that opened in 1910 to great critical acclaim, christened the Morgan Wing in 1918 after its benefactor's death, and which now houses the Arms and Armor gallery.

The arrival of the Hoentschel collection in New York was important on many levels. Contemporary journals and newspapers are full of articles discussing the collection and its contents, celebrating the great contribution it made to the American museum landscape. As one of the earliest public collections of furniture and furnishings in the United States, it set an important precedent that would be repeated in many other cities in the first half of the twentieth century. But Hoentschel was much more than a dealer or collector. His work as a designer and decorator included the creation of lavish eighteenth-century period interiors for clients in France, England, Argentina, Greece, and Japan. He was, furthermore, a contemporary designer, creating a pavilion for the Paris *Exposition Universelle* of 1900. This structure was a *Gesamtkunstwerk* consisting of furniture, ceramics, architectural panelling, and textiles that even travelled to the Louisiana Purchase

²² André Peraté and Gastone Brière, *Collections Georges Hoentschel*, Paris: Librairie Centrale des Beaux-Arts, 1908, Vol.1, ix.

Exposition in St. Louis in 1904. The large vase described above (Fig.1) was created for this pavilion.

With the arrival of the Hoentschel collection, the Metropolitan was forging new paths. The recognition that furniture and furnishings were in fact worthy of being studied and displayed, as both models for decorators and craftspeople as well as objects of aesthetic pleasure, was important. According to its mission statement from 1870, the museum's founders wanted to avoid re-creating the aristocratic collections of Europe that reinforced both social and material hierarchies. The museum was

to be located in the City of New York, for the purpose of establishing and maintaining in said city a Museum and library of art, of encouraging and developing the study of the fine arts, and the application of arts to manufacture and practical life, of advancing the general knowledge of kindred subjects, and, to that end, of furnishing popular instruction.²³

It is somewhat ironic, then, that the founding collection of the Metropolitan's decorative arts department was largely made up of fragments of furniture and furnishings from the long eighteenth century, many of which carried royal or aristocratic provenance, would-be or real. Pieces from the collection were in fact illustrated in handbooks for decorators published in the years following the opening of the galleries, and were displayed in a small exhibition in 1917 called *The Designer and the Museum*, demonstrating its influence on American taste.²⁴ The Hoentschel objects continued to be used as models for designers well into the twentieth century. Two sections of a balustrade from the Hoentschel collection (Fig. 2) were even used by the designer who put together the Louis XIV State Bedroom in the Wrightsman Wing at The Metropolitan, which opened in 1988, as a model for the reproduction balustrade in the gallery. (Fig. 3)

On a pedagogical level, preparatory research for this exhibition provided an opportunity to re-contextualize the Hoentschel collection within the transformed landscape of the study of objects, where the term 'decorative arts' retains a role, to be sure, but is no longer the only frame within which to view furniture and furnishings. The collection's fate within the Metropolitan is emblematic of a shift in

²³ Charter of The Metropolitan Museum of Art, State of New York, Laws of 1870, Chapter 197, passed April 13, 1870 and amended L.1898, ch. 34; L. 1908, ch. 219, as cited on The Metropolitan Museum of Art website: <http://www.metmuseum.org/about-the-museum/mission-statement>.

²⁴On this phenomenon, see Daniëlle Kisluk-Grosheide, "The Hoentschel Collection Comes to New York," in *Salvaging the Past: Georges Hoentschel and French Decorative Arts from the Metropolitan Museum of Art*, Daniëlle Kisluk-Grosheide, Deborah L. Krohn, and Ulrich Leben, eds, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2013, 8, and bibliography in notes 57 – 59. The pieces were illustrated in Alvan Crocker Nye's 1914 *Furniture Designing and Draughting*, New York: The William T. Comstock Co., 1914.



Figure 2
French, 1685–1710, *Fragment of a balustrade*, turned and carved oak with traces of paint and gilding.
H. 34 in. (86.4 cm).
The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Gift of J. Pierpont Morgan, 1906 (07.225.483a,b)



Figure 3
French, ca. 1987, *Baluster*, turned and carved wood with paint and gilding.
H. 34 in. (86.4 cm)
The Metropolitan Museum of Art

the relationship of the decorative arts to the fine arts in the age of material culture. Many of the Hoentschel objects that were in good condition upon their arrival at the Metropolitan were placed on display, but others, especially the fragments and damaged pieces, were put in the storeroom and were not seen until the recent exhibition at the Bard Graduate Center (BGC) brought them out of hiding and created a historiographic context within which to understand their condition, as well as their origin and form. (Fig. 4) The image depicts a few of these objects in the BGC gallery installation.

Since the Hoentschel collection's arrival in the first decade of the twentieth century, the Metropolitan Museum has acquired many more valuable pieces of medieval and eighteenth-century French furniture and furnishings through both purchase and gift, displacing many Hoentschel pieces that are in rough condition or do not have impressive provenances. The idea of providing models for designers that inspired Morgan's acquisition of the Hoentschel collection for the Metropolitan is no longer explicitly part of the Museum's mission, though education remains an



Figure 4 Installation view, *Salvaging the Past: Georges Hoentschel and French Decorative Arts from the Metropolitan Museum of Art*, Bard Graduate Center, 2013. Bard Graduate Center: Decorative Arts, Design History, Material Culture; New York. Photographer: Michael Nagle.

important dimension of the visitor experience.

If the perspective on many of the Hoentschel objects were to be shifted, could they be considered not as second-rate pieces of eighteenth-century furniture, but instead as the material culture of the furniture and furnishings business in nineteenth-century France? Could they tell a story about their transformation: from luxury objects during the *Ancien Régime*; salvaged during the various social and political upheavals between the Revolution of 1789 and the Paris Commune of 1871; then to serving, in their semi-ruined state, as models for the self-conscious re-creation of the golden age of French interior design and decoration; travelling overseas to the Metropolitan Museum of Art; and finally educating a new generation of students? Using the tools of a material culture approach, layers of meaning can be peeled back, in some cases literally, through sensitive conservation, and these objects can be understood as historical documents that bear witness to a remarkable trajectory in the history of craftsmanship, taste, the art market, and the museum. The fragments of furniture and furnishings that moved through Hoentschel's workshop, and happened to have been there when Morgan saw them in April of 1906, thus become multivalent signs, capable of illuminating a variety of subjects.

In preparation for the Hoentschel exhibition at the BGC, through researching and writing catalogue entries, students learned not only about eighteenth-century French furniture and furnishings, but also about the history of France, of collecting, of style, and of taste. No one method would have been adequate to synthesize and contextualize the material. Approaches from art history and conservation, visual studies, design history, and social history have all played a role, but the broad conceptual framework of material culture is the rubric that best enables the breadth of questions to array themselves out over the material. I'd like to quote Jules Prown, one of the founders of the field of material culture studies, to hammer that point out:

Material culture is just what it says it is – namely, the manifestations of culture through material productions. And the study of material culture is the study of material to understand culture, to discover the beliefs – the values, ideas, attitudes, and assumptions – of a particular community of society at a given time.²⁵

To travel beyond terminology, as my title promises, we must be inclusive, and consider the particular questions needed to understand an object or group of objects as they move through time, from production to consumption, from creation to collection, re-use, and display. The questions may come from a variety of fields, but it is clear that to study the material world, the best approach is an open mind.

Deborah L. Krohn is Associate Professor and Coordinator for History and Theory of Museums at the Bard Graduate Center, New York. She is a specialist in Italian Renaissance Decorative Arts and Material Culture, the History and Theory of Museums, and Culinary History. Her monograph, *Food and Knowledge in Renaissance Italy: Bartolomeo Scappi's Paper Kitchens* is forthcoming with Ashgate Publishing in 2015.

krohn@bgc.bard.edu

²⁵ Jules David Prown, "The Truth of Material Culture: History or Fiction," in *History from Things: Essays in Material Culture*, Steven Lubar and W. David Kingery, eds, Washington and London: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1995, 1.