References


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Book Reviews


Reviewed by Robin Boast

Of the state of recent books on ceramic variability and material culture studies, Artefacts as Categories should stand out as one of the more useful. This is not so much due to Dr. Miller's admitted archaeological bent for this study, but to his concern with the minutiae of ceramic variability as an active representation rather than as statistical noise. Not that this book is at all short of formal analysis, but Artefacts as Categories is primarily a study of people and their material objects. Those who are interested in yet another material culture study of 'pots to people' will be disappointed. For those of us who are interested in 'people to pots', approach, Dr. Miller's book is a delightful read.

The major goal of this book, that of primary interest to the archaeologist, though only a few of the many explored, are, first, to explain the limitations of the manner in which archaeology posits the relation between material and society, and, second, to show the richness of the archaeological data available that is usually ignored. Dr. Miller does both in an extensive and provocative way, but tends in the end to leave one a bit puzzled.

Dr. Miller draws his data from Dangwara Village in the Maui region of Central India. This setting may seem to present an uniquely convenient social venue for the study of categorization and material form, for India is well known for its richness of both material form and social context. But this would be to overlook the purpose of this work. The purpose of this work is to demonstrate to us stubborn archaeologists the fuzziness and polysemic nature of material form in social use. For this purpose, the chosen setting proves most acceptable.

We are provided, for the strict formalists among us, with a reasonable formal analysis of the ceramic variability found within Dangwara Village. Formal attributes and their organizational structure, as well as an extensive functional analysis, are provided in Chapters 3 and 4. The most interesting aspect of this work comes when this formal analysis is compared and qualified (in Chapters 6 and 7) with the ritual and symbolic frameworks within which this pottery is used. It is in these chapters that the informal use of aspects of the variability is shown to have the strongest influence over the ultimate categorization of the pots within the society.

An example of this interplay between the informal use and formal variability is seen in the example of the use of the 'parti' or the facet that is found on water vessels. Although restricted to containers, these 'parti' are the major distinguishing feature for this class of pots. The presence or absence of one or two 'parti' distinguishes most of the pots,
both ritual and secular, in this class. But this morphological attribute does not distinguish this kind of pottery on its own -- there are other formal attributes that must be considered. These are of food, caste and gender, each adding a different dimension to the context by which each category is determined in practice.

This 'dimensioning' of a category, this contextualization, Dr. Miller calls 'framing'. Framing is defined as 'the process by which contextual clues are used to decide which of the various possible interpretations should be given to the object on any specific occasion' (p. 9). It is with the idea of framing that this work should come into its own. Unfortunately we are left here wondering what we missed. Though in the final three chapters of the book we are provided with what we hope will be a clarification of this polysynthetic, dynamic network of formal attributes and information, we find only further ratiocination and example. We wait for the promise of artefacts not as facts but as 'constructs' (p. 13) -- but the clarification never comes.

There is a great deal of rehashing of the original points under the slightly more generalized guise of ceramics as codes, or pragmatics and one gets the feeling that this has all been said a few chapters ago. The informal in these three chapters is never given any firm grounding. Nothing is clarified, even when discussing the pottery as a medium for social strategy, manipulation of form and context is reduced to simplistic mechanisms, validated by equation with framing, emulation, fear of content, etc. None of these strategies is ever developed, and framing as an active social structure is never really defined. We are left with the 'informal', potentially the most interesting aspect of this work, represented only through the example or, what is worse, reduced to a formalism.

This unfortunate retreat from the implications of the study leaves the reader wondering about the application of the 'informal' in archaeological categorization. Here too Miller does not help his cause. He offers hope, as I think there is, when he states that "...in the present work it is the complex categorization represented by the pots themselves that has formed the central part of the evidence, and this is often equally available to the archaeologist." (p. 198). We are, however, offered no clear path to these informal aspects of an object's frame, so central to its categorization. We are even told a few pages later that "...it appears that the variability in forms...represented only a part of the actual variability of ceramic categories, which also encompassed the heterogeneity of the social context..." (p. 202). However, we are never sure what constitutes a social context, how to determine its relationship with material form, or even what constitutes the informal within a frame.

Many of us believe that much can be done with this kind of evidence, and with an understanding and openness to informal criteria and the dynamics of material categories in social strategies. There is much concern with the existence of a link between material form and social strategy. Such a study as this, therefore, which furthers the understanding of the use of material form in everyday social interaction, is always welcomed. I would highly recommend Artefacts as Categories for anyone interested in the categorization studies, material culture studies or contextual archaeology, for here is an excellent work with much to say about the relationship between material variability and active social categorization. Although this study does not fulfill what one considers to be the inherent potential, it does go much further in developing the study of material culture as a dynamic social medium.

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Reviewed by Nigel Holman

Autobiographical accounts are invaluable companions to formal histories for anyone interested in the development of an archaeological thought. Having written the most comprehensive and popular of the histories of archaeology during his career, Glyn Daniel has now given us Some Small Harvest, a personal account of his life, his career and the last fifty years of British archaeology.

During his lifetime, Glyn Daniel has witnessed a great many changes in archaeological discipline and has now been created where one did not previously exist (as an aside, if we accept that an important characteristic of a discipline is its self-recognition as a coherent field of inquiry, then the histories in themselves are important landmarks). Having said this, archaeology in the 1930s, '40s and '50s has little in common with the archaeology of the 1980s. Similarly, the sort of person who was attracted to the discipline than is very different from a society it enters now. The differences involved go far beyond the bland distinctions ("history" vs."process" etc.) which are frequently cited today, deriving ultimately from different social contexts with different values and concerns -- and a discipline with different organizing principles -- from those of today.

Thus Glyn Daniel has literary skills, humanist qualities and a wide circle of talented acquaintances from diverse fields, all three of which are extremely rare in the milieu of modern academic archaeology, which tends to discourage such attainments.

All of these qualities are illustrated in Some Small Harvest. Firstly, it is a splendidly written book with a comfortably personal style, honed by a lifetime of writing and editing for both academic and popular audiences. Secondly, it is written with affection for the most important people and things in his life: his wife Ruth, his close friends, his College, his archaeology and last, but not necessarily least, his appetite for good food and wine. Thirdly, the text is liberally scattered with references to a vast number of famous individuals from the world of archaeology and beyond.

For almost every individual mentioned, Glyn Daniel offers an anecdote, many of which seem to come straight from the plot of a Tom Sharpe or Malcolm Bradbury novel. His retelling of incidents such as H.M. Chewick's encounter