

Moving objects: French history and the study of material culture

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What does it mean to see the history of France through objects? In 1837, Thomas Carlyle chose three things to structure his analysis of the French Revolution: the Bastille, the Constitution and the Guillotine.¹ Yet Carlyle used these objects as a kind of shorthand, as symbols for the greater whole, rather than subjects of sustained analysis and reflection. This special issue puts the analysis of objects at the heart of French history, to ask what material histories of France might mean.

Leonie Hannan and Sarah Longair have observed that ‘as long as humans have made material things, material things have shaped human history.’² It is, as Neil MacGregor remarked in his *History of the World in 100 Objects*, the very making of *things* that differentiates humans from animals.³ Yet if it is hard—if not impossible—to imagine history without things, it is also true that historians have not always done objects justice. Thirty years ago, Peter Burke noted that much of the work on ‘material culture’ by the ‘new historians’ preferred texts about objects to the study of objects themselves.⁴ This is certainly true of those French historians, for instance, who relied on inventories to tell material histories.⁵ The articles in this special issue instead slow down to explore the kinds of material sources that we often describe, list, remember or picture in our research, but which we had not taken the time to examine closely: a suitcase, a vase, a card, a sheep, a pincushion, a pamphlet, a porcelain dog. What could these objects tell us that

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1 Carlyle’s history is divided into three volumes, respectively titled for the Bastille, the Constitution and the Guillotine. T. Carlyle, *The French Revolution: A History* (New York, 1934), xxiii–xxix. For a discussion of the book, see A. Cobban, ‘Carlyle’s French Revolution’, *History*, 48 (1963), 306–16.

2 L. Hannan and S. Longair, *History through Material Culture* (Manchester, 2017), 1.

3 N. MacGregor, ‘Olduvai stone chopping tool’, *A History of the World in 100 Objects* (New York, 2011), 9–14.

4 P. Burke, ‘Overture: the new history, its past and its future’, in *New Perspectives on Historical Writing*, ed. P. Burke (University Park, PA, 1992), 14.

5 This is mentioned later but a good starting point is A. Pardailhé-Galabrun, *La Naissance de l’intime, 3 000 foyers parisiens, XVII^e–XVIII^e siècles* (Paris, 1988).

other sources have not? What does it mean to take their materiality seriously, and how does this change how we understand our research? And what—if anything—does material culture have to say about French history in particular? The articles cover a broad range of examples and adopt contrasting approaches to understanding objects. But what they share is a common purpose: making objects the centre of our analyses. As Hannan and Longair have argued, historians should ‘view material culture not only as a form of evidence, but also as a way of thinking about the past.’⁶

In this special issue, objects are a way of thinking about a particularly *French* past. What is the special significance of material cultures to how the histories of France and the French-speaking world have been conceived? To what extent do they allow us to see the political realities and collective memories of the post-revolutionary period, as well as the intimacies of private lives and feelings? These case studies were brought together in a series of workshops and discussions that were ironically dematerialized: by the time the events began in 2020, our material connections had been abruptly cut off as the COVID-19 pandemic saw many of us—along with people around the world—confined within the walls of our own homes. The only option for organizing the workshops was online. At the very moment that our worlds became more virtualized than before, we gathered to discuss material and physical things. Some participants were museum professionals or established historians of material culture, whilst others were new to the study of objects. These online discussions reflected on the relationship between objects, society, and the past, spanning from the early modern period to the twenty-first century. In the interest of chronological and theoretical cohesion the articles published here all focus on the period after the French Revolution. This permits us to think more carefully about objects in France during a period of major economic and geopolitical shifts which altered its historical trajectory.

It has become easier than ever to research objects at a distance—museums and archives make great efforts to ensure images and records are available digitally, and many undertook heroic efforts to accelerate these programmes during necessary periods of confinement and constrained travel. Yet, as our workshops demonstrated, whilst digitization affords new opportunities for research, it cannot overwrite the need to dwell on the materiality of our research material. The architect Susan Yee described her research encounters at the Le Corbusier archive in Paris, including the pleasure and stimulation of engaging with original drawings from the architect. When the curator proudly announced they were digitizing the material, Yee lamented the distance between the object and its digital equivalent:

if I had accessed this drawing from home, I would never have known that it was stored separately, carefully rolled, that it was dirty with smudges and fingerprints [...]. Looking at the curator’s scans made me think respectfully about mass consumption, about allowing everyone to have access, about the technical problems of how to use a cursor to move around the drawing on the screen, and about how differently I understood the digital image and the designer behind it.⁷

Indeed, as Maryann Dever has noted, despite the transformations which digitization has brought for access, storage and archiving practice, this does ‘not herald the end of our concerns with materiality as it is clear that the “digital turn” neither deprives nor relieves us of the need to think about paper.’⁸

6 Hannan and Longair, *History through Material Culture*, 162.

7 S. Yee, ‘The archive’, in *Evocative Objects: Things We Think With*, ed. S. Turkle (Cambridge, MA, 2007), 31–36.

8 M. Dever, ‘Provocations on the pleasures of archived paper’, *Archives and Manuscripts*, 41 (2013), 173–82.

Our workshops raised questions and disagreements that remain unresolved, and which animate the discussion in the articles that follow. Questions of materiality offer a challenge from the outset. Do animals count in this form of analysis?⁹ What of landscapes, images or even texts? When studying archival documents, do we not encounter both the text and the material thing on which it is inscribed? And how can historians make sense of the objects that appear—sometimes unexpectedly—in archival collections? Unpicking how different readings of materiality relate to the histories we write can reframe and rescale the object of analysis. We can call into question the boundaries of analytical categories by asking what influence—if any—objects have on history itself. Indeed, Jane Bennet coined the useful phrase ‘thing-power’ as a means of expressing the ‘efficacy of objects in excess of the human meanings, designs, or purposes they express or serve.’¹⁰ Many of the pieces in this special issue treat materiality as an approach rather than a bounded category of ‘the material’. The question of whether or not objects have agency is a dynamic debate; for this collection it was useful to think of what Rebecca Spang described as the ‘slipperiness’ and ‘muteness’ of objects, which is what allows them to generate a range of reactions and emotions. Her own work on *assignats*—the monetary instrument used to make payments in the French Revolution—re-thought economic history by looking at its materiality, and opened up questions of fragility, fraud and fetishization.¹¹ Objects are holders of memory and heritage, as well as public and private feelings, practices and performances; they are not always ‘obedient’, and are generally ephemeral, often absent and sometimes alive. The study of material culture embodies these very complexities as it requires us to study objects through their immateriality, be they inventories, records or digital images.

In this introduction, we outline the scholarship on material culture which inspired many of the contributions before going more deeply into how objects help understand the (French) past. In the third section, we sketch out the main themes which different papers addressed, from questions of performance and emotion to conservation and preservation. Alone, the articles introduce us to objects which made up the public and private lives of French men and women in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries; together, they present the significance, fluidity and complexity of French objects as they moved through space and time. The objects under examination are linked to histories of consumption and capitalism to some extent, but this is not the principal focus of the special issue. If studies of material culture have often offered rich pathways into the ancient and early modern periods, this study shows that they also hold layers of meaning for modernists, and that objects can be read as physical repositories for different ideas of Frenchness or identities more generally. In addition to this, they were central to the expression, articulation but also creation of public as well as private feelings. By taking a very broad understanding of ‘what is material culture?’, the special issue ultimately offers a variety of ways and methods to study individual, mundane, luxury, absent or collections of objects.

I

The field of material culture studies has long been driven by archaeologists, anthropologists, antiquarians, art historians and folklorists who are trained to study objects. Often, this has centred around finding different ways into social histories and wider understandings of everyday practice. From anthropology, the work of Marcel Mauss in the 1920s shaped future discussions of how objectification could serve as a tool for analysing social relations, focussing especially on

9 This question is one of agency, though also of language. After all, in common English usage, a dangerous dog is not executed, but rather destroyed. This technically means the animal is cremated, but in terms of language it cannot escape us that the animal becomes objectified, as if once it breaches the rules of social behaviour, it becomes an object rather than an animal.

10 J. Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham, NC, 2010), 20.

11 R. Spang, *Stuff and Money in the Time of the French Revolution* (Cambridge, MA, 2015), 4–7.

‘the gift’ as a material and symbolic object of exchange.¹² Clifford Geertz engages perhaps most strongly with this field through the concept of ‘thick description’, in which the layering of how meaning is produced can be studied alongside that meaning itself, especially through observations of people, place and custom (often lingering especially on the material qualities of those categories).¹³ So, too, anthropologist Mary Douglas’ work offers an insight into foundational approaches to material culture, particularly through her interrogation of ‘dirt’ both as a physical thing and a symbolic web of wider meaning created around its perception and avoidance.¹⁴ Daniel Miller’s work on material culture emphasized the ways in which social relations can be unravelled and examined using material culture, and in 1996 he and Chris Tilley launched the *Journal of Material Culture*.¹⁵ As Tilley notes, ‘The concept of materiality is thus typically used to refer to the fleshy, corporeal and physical, as opposed to spiritual, ideal and value-laden aspects of human existence.’¹⁶ Material culture emerged out of the study of artefacts, which had dominated discussions of anthropology throughout much of the nineteenth into early twentieth centuries. As a result, much of the original work on material culture therefore owes a debt to scholarship in archives, libraries, special collections and galleries.¹⁷

Although historians are better known for working with texts, they have also made an important imprint on material culture studies. In North America, where material culture studies have been well developed for over a century, works by art historian Bernard Herman and American folk historian Henry Glassie have had an enormous influence in shaping the field towards the end of the twentieth century. ‘Material culture is the conventional name for the tangible yield of human conduct’, wrote Glassie, ‘beginning necessarily with things, but not ending with them, [using] objects to approach human thought and action.’¹⁸ Leora Auslander’s 2005 essay ‘Beyond Words’ has become a common reference point for historians embarking on the study of objects.¹⁹ After all, material culture studies is not so much the study of objects, but the study of the many contexts which objects inhabit; and if anything, history is ‘the discipline of context.’²⁰ So if objects are important, we must look beyond the material objects themselves and explore the societal contexts, human relationships and mentalities, power dynamics and structures which they are shaped by but also help to shape. This is precisely what one of the best-known historians of France, Robert Darnton, was doing when he paired up with Clifford Geertz in the 1970s to organize a seminar on history and anthropology at Princeton. Darnton described the natural pairing of history with anthropological methods, noting how students began ‘adopting a semiotic view of culture’ without prior introduction to the theory. In encountering the two disciplines, they began to ‘construe the world through signs, not merely by means of verbal clues but also by reference to objects from everyday life.’²¹ Darnton’s own landmark work on French history itself displayed the traces of such interdisciplinary crossing when he drew from the work of Claude Lévi-Strauss to ask which ‘things are good to think with’ in *ancien régime* France.²² Thinking with objects as a means of disentangling cultural history allows for a shift in the layers of analysis. The crossing of disciplinary boundaries which happens when material culture comes to the fore is one of the many benefits of foregrounding this type of analysis.

12 M. Mauss, *The Gift: Forms and Functions of Exchange in Archaic Societies* (London, 1966), 41–43.

13 C. Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York, 2000), 3–30.

14 M. Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of the Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (London, 2002), 44.

15 D. Miller and C. Tilley, ‘Editorial’, *Journal of Material Culture*, 1 (1996), 5–14.

16 C. Tilley et al., ‘Introduction’, in *Handbook of Material Culture*, eds C. Tilley et al. (London, 2006), 3.

17 S. Pearce, *Museums, Objects, and Collections: A Cultural Study* (Washington D.C., 1992).

18 H. Glassie, *Material Culture* (Indianapolis, 1999), 41.

19 L. Auslander, ‘Beyond words’, *Am Hist R*, 110 (2005), 1015–45.

20 K. Harvey citing E. P. Thompson in K. Harvey, *History and Material Culture: A Student’s Guide to Approaching Alternative Sources* (Abingdon, 2018), 11.

21 R. Darnton, ‘On Clifford Geertz: field notes from the classroom’, *New York Review of Books*, 11 Jan. 2007.

22 R. Darnton, *The Great Cat Massacre and Other Episodes in French Cultural History* (New York, 1999), 4.

The literature on ‘material culture’ is deeply rooted in anglophone scholarship, as Dominique Poulot pointed out, but French scholarship and historiography have also been very interested in the study of things.²³ As Darnton’s earlier-quoted comment indicated, contemporary scholarship on material culture has often been built on theoretical foundations laid by French thinkers. In addition to the classic anthropologies of Mauss and Lévi-Strauss, the work of Bruno Latour on what has come to be known as actor network theory has been particularly influential. Latour’s work used the thick description of Geertz’s anthropology to refocus analysis on the relationship and outcomes of interaction. Instead of focussing on distinct entities, Latour was interested in their relational qualities, and it was through this discussion that the figure of the *actant* (‘any entity that modifies another entity in a trial’) emerged.²⁴ This framing is useful for this special issue, which seeks to understand the relational qualities of moving objects. Some of the objects described crossed borders and boundaries, whilst others elicited emotional responses, or even reshaped the world around them.

Some of the first practitioners of material history in France, such as Daniel Roche and Alain Corbin, were interested in objects as part of the project of history from below. For Daniel Roche, the production and consumption of ‘banal’—or commonplace—objects under the Old Regime was the key to understanding a slow revolution in everyday life, the gradual ‘conquest’ of darkness by technologies of illumination, and the spread of quotidian luxury consumables, such as bread and wine.²⁵ Picking up where Roche left off, Alain Corbin’s work on the long nineteenth century has often asked how changing objects express broad historical ‘imaginaries’ and ways of understanding the world, from a growing obsession with starched linen, to the role that bells played in constructing a sense of community and place.²⁶ The study of objects has since been widely recognized as allowing unique access to the stories of people we would otherwise not come across. As a natural extension of this, objects act as invaluable insights into ‘everyday’ rituals and environments. One outgrowth of the *Annales* tradition in the second half of the twentieth century was a turn to the material culture of the routine.²⁷ Guy Thuillier, for instance, worked to recover the experiences of everyday life in the Nivernais in the period when an ‘old regime’ of the senses, of hygiene and of health was being replaced by new material circumstances.²⁸ Debates raged on the history of quotidian life in German scholarship during the 1970s and 1980s, when the concept of *Alltagsgeschichte* was held to be a politically charged way of stripping social theory out of romanticized vignettes of the past.²⁹ Alf Lütke, one of the foremost proponents of the everyday’s significance for historians, saw instead an opportunity to ‘arch beyond and cut across (and through) the lines of demarcation separating the established scholarly approaches and domains.’³⁰ The new interest in inventories in the 1980s by French historians such as Annik Parhailhé-Galabrun, whose work *The Birth of Intimacy* explored Parisian homes and domestic lives, or Daniel Roche as described, have been particularly important in demonstrating the use of objects as pathways to the everyday, the *quotidien*, and more specifically the intimate. They were part of a wave of interest in using object inventories as a means to access the private lives of Parisians and French people more broadly, specifically of the early

23 D. Poulot, ‘Une Nouvelle Histoire de la culture matérielle?’, *Revue d’histoire moderne et contemporaine*, 44 (1997), 344–57.

24 B. Latour, *Politics of Nature: How to Bring the Sciences into Democracy* (Cambridge, MA, 2004), 237.

25 D. Roche, *Histoire des choses banales: naissance de la consommation dans les sociétés traditionnelles (XVIII^e–XIX^e siècles)* (Paris, 1997).

26 A. Corbin, ‘Le Grand Siècle du linge’, *Ethnologie française*, 16 (1986), 299–310; A. Corbin, *Les Cloches de la terre: paysage sonore et culture sensible dans les campagnes au XIX^e siècle* (Paris, 1994).

27 F. Braudel, *Les Structures du quotidien* (Paris, 1979).

28 G. Thuillier, *Pour une histoire du quotidien au XIX^e siècle en Nivernais* (Paris, 1977).

29 P. Steege, A. Bergerson, M. Healy and P. Swett, ‘The history of everyday life: a second chapter’, *J Mod Hist*, 80 (2008), 358–78.

30 A. Lütke, ‘What is the history of everyday life and who are its practitioners?’, in *The History of Everyday Life: Reconstructing Historical Experiences and Ways of Life*, ed. A. Lütke (Princeton, NJ, 1995), 3–40.

modern period.³¹ The interest in objects and intimacy has continued in French historiography, with Clémentine Vidal-Naquet's work on postcards during the Great War being a good example of this.³² For Hannan and Longair, investigating material culture is one way to 'offer a voice to those whose lives have not been recorded in text'.³³ Such everyday intimacy can be emotional just as it can be political. In his latest book, for example, Daniel Lee followed the trace of an object—an armchair—to tell the story and memory of an ordinary SS officer, giving us insight not into the usual high ranking figures of the Nazi hierarchy, but into the low-ranking officials who facilitated the persecution and extermination of Jews on a day-to-day basis.³⁴ In these intimate histories of objects, the influence of Roland Barthes' *Mythologies* offers a telling reminder of the explanatory potential of material history, whether the totemic power of a glass of wine or the novel attraction of a Citroën car.³⁵ Henri Lefebvre's emphasis on the importance of the quotidian was, in turn, founded on the belief that it 'contains within it an elusive communality and a utopian potential'.³⁶ In this tradition, objects have tended to serve as platforms for memory, or storytelling: from the box of photographs through which Annie Ernaux sifts her own life, or the sites of memory (themselves often objects) in which Pierre Nora discerns the crystallization of historical narrative.³⁷ These everyday intimacies marked objects as well as texts, showing the potential of moving objects as an analytical frame.

This was somewhat different to anglophone scholarship: in the early twentieth century, scholars in North America and Britain were studying objects as a way to talk about histories of commodities and consumerism.³⁸ This is still very much the case, and Frank Trentmann's work on the development of global consumption over the past five hundred years rethinks geopolitical dynamics through the study of commodities in circulation.³⁹ The production and consumption of commodities is a major field of study which makes clear our integral if complex relationship to the material world. French historians, too, have contributed to histories of consumerism and capitalism, such as Fernand Braudel's *Civilisation matérielle, économie et capitalisme* or Roche's later *Histoires des choses banales*.⁴⁰ Recent work on labour and consumption, or the edited collection *Le Magasin du monde* on globalization and material culture, reflect how contemporary French historians place objects at the heart of local, national but also global histories.⁴¹ Still, it is interesting to note how objects were often used to tell private, personal, intimate histories of France—perhaps also because France's history of production, industrialization and consumption is not the same as that of Britain and North America.

Over the past decades, anglophone historiography has perhaps been especially accepting of, as Geoff Eley put it, 'creative ways of combining the new incitements of cultural history and

31 A. Pardaillé-Galabrun, *La Naissance de l'intime*; D. Roche, R. Arnette and F. Ardellier, 'Inventaires après-décès parisiens et culture matérielle au XVIII^e siècle', in *Les Actes notariés, source de l'histoire sociale, XVI^e–XIX^e siècles*, ed. B. Vogler (Strasbourg, 1979), 231–40; H. Ariès and G. Duby (eds), *Histoire de la vie privée*, 5 vols (Paris, 1985–1988); L. Bourquin, 'Les Objets de la vie quotidienne dans la première moitié du XVI^e siècle à travers cent inventaires après décès parisiens', *Revue d'histoire moderne et contemporaine*, 36 (1989), 465–75.

32 C. Vidal-Naquet, *Correspondances conjugales 1914–1918 dans l'intimité de la Grande Guerre* (Paris 2014).

33 Hannan and Longair, *History through Material Culture*, 161.

34 D. Lee, *The SS Officer's Armchair: Uncovering the Hidden Life of a Nazi* (New York, 2020).

35 R. Barthes, *Mythologies* (New York, 1991), 58–61, 88–90.

36 J. Moran, 'History, memory and the everyday', *Rethinking Hist*, 8 (2004), 51–68.

37 A. Ernaux, *Les Années* (Paris, 2008); P. Nora, 'Présentation', *Les Lieux de mémoire III: Les France* (3 vols.), vol. 2. *Traditions* (Paris, 1984–1992), 13.

38 Poulot, 'Une Nouvelle Histoire de la culture matérielle?', 344–57.

39 F. Trentmann, *Empire of Things: How We Became a World of Consumers, from the Fifteenth Century to the Twenty-First* (London, 2016).

40 F. Braudel, *Civilisation matérielle, économie et capitalisme, XV^e–XVIII^e siècle* (3 vols.). vol. 1, *Les Structures du quotidien: le possible et l'impossible* (Paris, 1979), 11.

41 J.-Y. Grenier, 'Travailler plus pour consommer plus: désir de consommer et essor du capitalisme du XVII^e siècle à nos jours', *Annales: Histoire, sciences sociales*, 65 (2010), 787–98; S. Venayre and P. Singaravelou, *Le Magasin du monde: la mondialisation par les objets du XVIII^e siècle à nos jours* (Paris, 2020).

the hard-won, but now established, gains of social history'.⁴² A particularly prominent example of this can be found in Leora Auslander's examination of French furnishing which intertwines discussions of state formation with analyses of daily existence by focussing on objects. As Auslander explains, 'people may understand themselves to be more truly represented by their things than by their elected representatives'.⁴³ Many contributions in this special issue were inspired by this approach which offers a meaningful way to make sense of the everyday through 'object relations', using material histories as a way of unpacking wider networks of relation.⁴⁴ The everyday can become a fruitful way of interrogating material histories, understanding objects not just as receptacles for memory, or means of making sense of rituals, but of unpicking social relations. In their survey of the category, Steege, Bergerson, Healy and Swett establish three categories for approaching everyday history: place (helping to unlock discussions of community as well as mobility), agency (where the production of meaning can take place ritualistically or through improvisation or reaction), and storytelling (where fragmentary sources are examined and woven into narrative).⁴⁵ These categories of analysis map reasonably well onto our discussion of objects in this issue, where we have sought to establish firstly the significance of place (why France?), the agency exerted by and upon objects (through performance and emotions), and also the stories told about or with objects (again, prefiguring discussions of emotion, though also through the conservation of objects).

II

In many ways this collection follows the tendency in French scholarship to use objects as a way to explore the intimate, everyday lives of French people. Yet the objects in this collection—the Napoleonic memorabilia, the art collections, the sheep, the cards, the work tools, the gifts—also exist in public and even political spaces, speaking at different times, in different ways, to collective, regional and national identities. Contributors of the workshop were often uncomfortable with overemphasizing the *Frenchness* of the objects at hand because the objects repeatedly challenged fixed ideas of the nation. Still, the objects were often used, circulated and understood within national and political frameworks, albeit flexible ones.

The gradual modernization of the French state and of its industry over the seventeenth, eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was—like all empires, monarchies and nations in this period—bound to material things. The emergence of the *Garde-Meuble de la Couronne* in the early seventeenth century, driven by Henri IV, Jean-Baptiste Colbert and Louis XIV, showed the importance attributed to the objects which adorned French royal homes and palaces. Later known as 'Mobilier impérial' and then 'Mobilier national', the *Garde-Meuble* helped to generate national manufacturers of tapestries and porcelains in Gobelins, Savonnerie, Sèvres and Beauvais, manufacturers which became powerful symbols of French art and design from the eighteenth century.⁴⁶ Images of the exclusivity, superiority and quality of French manufacturing more widely have certainly been preserved into the twenty-first century. It is a well-known peculiarity of French manufacturing that many French industries mechanized much later than their neighbours across the Channel or in the German lands, and many sectors continued to rely on artisanal production or proto-industrial systems where rural workers worked in their own homes.⁴⁷ The transatlantic circulation of French revolutionary objects studied by Ashli White

42 G. Eley, *A Crooked Line: From Cultural History to the History of Society* (Ann Arbor, 2005), 200.

43 L. Auslander, *Taste and Power: Furnishing Modern France* (Oakland, 1996), 423.

44 J. Attfield, *Wild Things: The Material Culture of Everyday Life* (Oxford, 2000), 1.

45 Steege, Bergerson, Healy, and Swett, 'The history of everyday life'.

46 H. Harvard and M. Vauchon, *Les Manufactures nationales: les Gobelins, Sèvres, la Savonnerie, et Beauvais* (Paris, 1889).

47 G. Noiriel, *Les Ouvriers dans la société française* (Paris, 2002), 23, 35–36.

points to their international reputation at the time, and still in the mid-nineteenth century, at the Crystal Palace exhibition, it was clear that the French were internationally recognized for their small manufacturers who created high-quality products of impeccable bourgeois taste.⁴⁸ The lace workers in Hopkin's piece, or the Moulinex workers in the work of Jackie Clarke, highlight some of the unique aspects of French artisanal and working-class culture.⁴⁹

The story of France itself, moreover, has been tightly bound to things. There is no doubt that objects were central to nation-building: Nora's collection on French *lieux de mémoire* is a familiar reminder of the importance of material things—cathedrals, wine, the *clocher*, the Panthéon—in the construction of the modern French nation. Works by Richard Wrigley on the Liberty cap and Jennifer Heuer on the tricolour cockade add to a broad literature which explores the multifaceted meaning of material things during the French Revolution.⁵⁰ Objects have also been studied to access lesser-known histories of French people more broadly. Works on *assignats*, furniture or Jewish homes and collections, have also used objects to illustrate more complicated relationships between civilians, things and France.⁵¹ Following on from Mauss, scholars explored gift-giving in early modern France to reveal everyday practices, whilst Hannah Williams recently focussed on four objects to explore new aspects of art and religion in eighteenth-century Paris.⁵² The 'Frenchness' of these objects, however, can be easily contested and recent studies have shown precisely the ability of objects to transcend boundaries. Studies of objects as diverse as croissants and Christmas trees reveal the porosity of geographical borders and the ephemerality of objects and their relationship(s) to communities.⁵³ The objects examined in this collection meet at this crossroad between the national and the transnational, reflecting local, regional and national concerns, as well as transnational origins, uses and destinies.

The spatial element of France's material history thus highlights the constructed nature of its borders as national boundaries. Indeed, this collection calls into question the 'Frenchness' of things, showing how objects physically journeyed through time and space, taking on different meanings and roles over their lifespan. Objects matter in French history not only because of how they can construct ideas of nationhood, but also how they can construct ideas of self and community, of power and authority, of authenticity and sincerity. This is not to say that Frenchness did not matter, but together the papers show how objects are precisely sources which allow us to look within but also beyond traditional geographies and chronologies. We might look at the cave paintings at Lascaux as an example of these shifting chronologies of object and nation: painted some 17,000 years ago, then rediscovered in 1940, these prehistoric paintings became a post-war cultural phenomenon in the context of 'the Gaullist rehabilitation of the French national past'.⁵⁴ This cave art predated France, yet its cultural significance was framed by André Malraux in the language of wartime resistance: his mythological retelling of the caves' use to store resistance weapons caches binds the material history of Lascaux into a spiritual history of the French

48 A. White, *Revolutionary Things: Material Culture and Politics in the Late Eighteenth-Century Atlantic World* (New Haven, 2023); W. Walton, *France at the Crystal Palace: Bourgeois Taste and Artisan Manufacture in the Nineteenth Century* (Oakland, 1992).

49 J. Clarke, 'Work, consumption and subjectivity in postwar France: Moulinex and the meanings of domestic appliances 1950s–70s', *J Cont Hist*, 47 (2012), 838–59.

50 N. Coquery, I. Coller and R. Flamein, 'Ce que les cultures matérielles peuvent apporter à l'historiographie de la Révolution française', *Annales historiques de la Révolution française*, 386 (2016), 125–44; R. Wrigley, 'Transformations of a revolutionary emblem: the liberty cap of the French Revolution', *Fr Hist*, 11 (1997) 131–169; J. Heuer, 'Hats on for the Nation! Women, servants, soldiers and the "sign of the French"', *Fr Hist*, 16 (2002) 28–52.

51 J. McAuley, *The House of Fragile Things: Jewish Art Collectors and the Fall of France* (Newhaven, 2022).

52 N. Zemon Davis, *The Gift in Sixteenth-Century France* (Madison, 2000); S. Kettering, 'Gift-giving and patronage in early modern France', *Fr Hist*, 2 (1988), 131–51; H. Williams, 'Saint Geneviève's miracles: art and religion in eighteenth-century Paris', *Fr Hist*, 30 (2016), 322–53.

53 J. Chevallier, *August Zang and the French Croissant: How Viennoiserie Came to France* (North Hollywood, 2009), 3–30; S. Foley, 'The Christmas tree becomes French: from foreign curiosity to philanthropic icon, 1860–1914', *Fr Hist and Civilization*, 7 (2017), 139–57.

54 D. Smith, 'Beyond the cave: Lascaux and the prehistoric in post-war French culture', *Fr Stud*, 58 (2004), 219–32.

nation.⁵⁵ Objects and things also take on national identities through their conservation, their use in performances and the emotional weight we attach to them. As Ludivine Broch notes in her article, the Gratitude Train France sent to the United States in 1949 was explicitly framed as an expression of ‘Frenchness’: donors were told the objects should ‘invoke the thought, tradition, charm and taste of our country’. But how ‘French’ were these objects after all? Along with items made in France, the donors chose to send others that were made abroad, putting the emphasis more on the sense that the objects reflected French ‘taste’ than French manufacture. And the donors themselves were hardly a cross-section of the population. In fact, Broch argues, the gifts came from ‘a certain type of France, and a certain type of French person’, above all urban and Parisian. Finally, once these partially French things arrived in America, many of the meanings of Frenchness that the objects were intended to convey were lost in translation. Other contributions to the special issue emphasize that objects and practices that historians might imagine as ‘French’, such as the lacemaking tools and folk cultures Hopkin explores, are really part of stories that are ‘simultaneously regional and supranational’.

The idea behind this collection was not to summarize the relationship between the French and their material world, but to explore it. France’s unique process of industrialization set it apart from many other Western nations, whilst its international reputation was as much one of revolutionary ideas as it was one of bourgeois taste. Moreover, material things and sites were often used in post-revolutionary France to create a sense of belonging, conformity and national unity. The objects in this collection speak to this political and industrial moment, but the articles all reveal the much longer lives of things, their layered meanings, and the ways they spoke to many other communities, individuals and intimacies.

III

Objects move and are moved around; they persist and degrade. They can be the unremarkable fodder of the everyday or become the focal point of our most sacred rituals. In addressing these moving objects, the individual articles in this issue address three overlapping themes. First, the concept of performance offers a way into histories of objects that move. Second, the articles explore how emotions infuse and emerge from the objects in our lives. These two themes lead into a third, essential to understanding all material cultures: conservation and preservation. None of these themes exists in isolation, and instead they flow through each of the contributions.

Many share a focus on how objects are used in performance. In her contribution, Ludivine Broch reminds herself to ‘start with the thing itself’. But a common feature of the articles in this issue is their reflections on how this very materiality is always an ongoing process. Objects are objectified in use. William Pooley’s article addresses the performance of ambivalent emotional objects: the cards used to tell fortunes from the eighteenth century onwards, ‘endlessly mythologized, romanticized, and actively repressed’ by the criminal justice system. Turning attention to the cards as images, texts and physical objects, Pooley explores how they were used to ‘practise’ emotions, encouraging fortune-tellers and their humble clients to probe relationships and feelings, providing historians with insights into the kinds of everyday emotional negotiation that are so hard to access. For these practitioners, the effects were—perhaps—magical, but also prosaic. From tavern tables to law courts, fortune-tellers and their clients elaborated meanings through performance. The consequences for understanding cards are twofold. First, it quickly becomes clear that the type of cards used for these practices did not greatly matter. Rather than the intricate symbolism of Tarot and other divination decks, many encounters made use of ‘ordinary’

⁵⁵ A. Malraux, *Œuvres complètes*, III, *Le Miroir des limbes* (6 vols.) (Paris, 1996), 455. Quoted in Smith, ‘Beyond the cave’, 221–22.

playing cards. Second, the emotional meanings that emerged in these encounters have little to do with the complex theories of occult writers since the eighteenth century. Instead, the cards were what Boris Jardine has called ‘paper tools’ that did simple things for personal relationships. Simple, light-hearted and even trivial, the cards nonetheless constantly invoke greater powers, revelations and hidden mysteries.

If the apparent solidity of ‘an object’ is always the product of continuing work, this opens up further questions: who does this work? In his contribution, Andrew Smith pushes the boundaries of things and agents to ask who is doing the doing. Are the sheep who appeared in the protests during the 1970s’ Larzac campaign objects, or subjects? In 1971, Defence Minister Michel Debré announced that the Larzac army base in the Massif Central would be expanded, displacing local farmers whose most famous product was the sheep’s-milk cheese, Roquefort. Smith’s article explores how these farmers, their supporters and the sheep fought back. Although the sheep-based protests sometimes verged on comedy, with farm animals making appearances in courtrooms and national landmarks, Smith takes the ovines seriously to explore problems of objects and agency in the context of Jane Bennet’s ‘thing-power’. The sheep were non-human or more-than-human, not things, yet somehow more than objects. ‘Sheep’, as one protestor noted, drawing attention to this blurring of agency, ‘made good protestors as the police could not control them.’⁵⁶ The Larzac campaign opens out in this way onto a much broader problem of Frenchness: the relation between a rural world often associated with tradition and the ‘modern’ France of Paris. What better image to illustrate this clash of material cultures than the Larzac sheep grazing beneath the Eiffel Tower? As Smith notes, the Larzac sheep are only part of a wider post-war pattern of animal protests, undoubtedly connected to tensions over the relationship between countryside and city in the new Europe of the European Economic Community. Animal protests blurred landscape, agents and objects, and produced new understandings of the relationships between people, things and place that travelled far beyond the Larzac plateau.

Several contributions to the special issue extend these concerns with the resonances of objects to questions of emotion and feeling, which is the second major theme we address. Material culture emerges as a particularly important place to think beyond linguistic texts about feelings and emotions that people find hard to put into words, or that historians find, in Broch’s words, too ‘fleeting, private, intangible’ to define. Although the use of material culture in the history of emotions has only recently started to emerge—the study of tokens from the Foundling Museum in London is an excellent example of this—the articles in this collection repeatedly refer to the strong feelings which people attach to the material worlds, things, objects and animals around them.⁵⁷ Objects conjured strong emotions amongst the French *exilés* in Tom Stammers’ piece; the emotional connection to the objects heightened the impact of the Napoleonic performances in Laura O’Brien’s article. In David Hopkin’s article, he asks how the tools of their trade might help historians understand the ambivalent emotions of lace makers in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. These objects represented different things to the lace maker, the buyer and the folklorist. The tapestry of meaning spun in the daily usage of the objects provides a meaningful way to unpick the changes in the lace industry and the people at its centre. On one hand, lace makers’ tools such as pillows, bobbins and pins were important conveyors of their otherwise unrecognized professional identity. They also helped reinforce or even create bonds of craft, commerce and female kinship, not least

56 D. Reid, ‘Larzac in the broad 1968 and after’, *French Politics, Culture & Society*, 32 (2014), 102.

57 S. Holloway, S. Downes and S. Randle (eds), *Feeling Things: Objects and Emotions through History* (Oxford, 2018); J. Styles, ‘Objects of emotion: the London Foundling Hospital tokens, 1741–1760’ in *Writing Material Culture History*, eds G. Riello and A. Gerritsen (London, 2015) 165–72.

when they were gifted or handed down. But the emotions these workers felt towards their tools were ambivalent. Along with the pride they took from them, lace makers experienced incredible pain from these 'instruments of torture', which restricted, distorted and destroyed their bodies and their minds.

The link between emotions and objects is further evident in Ludivine Broch's contribution which explores a similarly rich field of material culture: gifts. Her article analyses a distinctive way of saying thank you and of feeling grateful, in the exchange of objects gathered by popular subscription to recognize national gratitude. In 1949, individuals and organizations from across France sent 52,000 objects to America as a symbol of their gratitude for the role the United States played in the war and in the recovery afterwards. Broch explores how the meanings of these objects, and the feelings which they expressed but also created, changed over time. Given for a range of purposes, the vases, lace, children's toys, tableware, jewellery, postcards, paintings, fossils, books and even trees were changed by their recipients. From symbols of Frenchness and ambivalent gratitude, these things became American in America, losing their donors' feelings. Over time, these moving objects spoke, and they listened: they communicated cultural refinement and national grandeur, just as they echoed complex individual emotions, social beliefs and economic status.

The final major theme which this special issue speaks to is precisely that of preservation and conservation. Objects endure ... and degrade. Indeed, one of the unique contributions of a turn to material culture is a renewed focus on issues of preservation, transmission, display, absence and loss, and conservation. With the physical absence of his object of study—the playing cards—Pooley addresses head on one of the greatest problems we encounter when studying the past: the disappearance of mentalities and practices, but also things. Tom Stammers' article encapsulates many of these issues, exploring the emotional world of a collector and the fate of his collection. When objects are assembled into collections, they tell new stories and serve as props for particular kinds of identity formation. Stammers' article explores how the duc d'Aumale built rich collections of books and artworks in the mid-to-late nineteenth century, first in exile in London, and later after his return to France. This collection conjured up an image of (a certain kind of) Frenchness which survived the crossing of borders and the shifting of regimes. Exiled things reconciled exiled people with a world they sought to conserve, whereby their material culture became an act of political resistance. Collecting, in Aumale's case, was thus also an act of cultural resistance, a way to reaffirm his own family's history which had been so seriously threatened, but also to give his version of the history of France.

Laura O'Brien's contribution brings the collection full circle, showing how conservation and preservation are intertwined with performance. Focussing on the example of a play about Napoleon first performed in 1903, O'Brien shows how material culture connected to Bonaparte's life was preserved and displayed as part of a 'broader turn towards a "spectacular past", where historical narratives and biography were mediated via entertainment and spectacle'. Displays of associated Napoleonic memorabilia in the theatre's lobby—operating like 'secular relics'—heightened the audience's affective engagement with popular historical adaptations. Objects tied to Napoleon's life and death performed a 'spectacular past' whilst manipulating popular emotions and memories in their wider circulation through museums and collections, and even across the Channel in Britain. In both O'Brien and Stammers' articles, these objects do not simply symbolize Frenchness but embody the contested nature of politics in the post-Revolutionary century, thereby permitting new insights into the fractured nature of Frenchness and the competing emotions such objects expressed and conveyed. These were used not simply as means of forming or reinforcing identities, but also as vehicles for conflict and political contestation themselves.

IV

The articles in this special issue draw on long-standing conversations and traditions of research among anthropologists, archaeologists and museum professionals to suggest some of the ways historians, and especially historians of France, can approach things in all the liveliness of their performance, through their sometimes powerful effect on emotions and in their careful conservation. From fabrication, through use, to preservation, objects offer ways for French historians to rethink categories of agency, the nation-state and periodization. In their mute materiality, things pose new questions for historians of France. Rather than any common answers, the articles in this special issue aim to open up further questions about the omnipresence and importance of objects in French histories.

Indeed, the novelty of this special issue lies in the way it treats materiality as an ongoing problem, rather than seeing 'material culture' as a bounded category of source materials that historians can study. What does it mean for materiality to be a problem? First, that objects are highly conflictual. They are created or adapted to articulate conflict, contention and highly contested visions of what it is to be French. Indeed, when taken together, the articles show the different and at times opposing meanings of Frenchness in the material world. In post-revolutionary France, which is the period under focus here, the most obvious conflicts expressed through objects might be political. But the articles in this collection are just as interested in materiality as a site of debate about emotions, everyday interactions and memory. They are thus not always political, or politicized, within this national space. O'Brien's Napoleonic relics and Hopkin's work tools are more than their public image: they express identity in constructive ways, reveal divided memories and complex intimate lives. The objects in this collection ultimately invite us not only to think of conflictual identities or politics, but also of personal and conflictual feelings.

Second, what objects are and what they do remains an open question. Inspired by the new materialism of scholars such as Bennett and the actor network theory of Latour, many of the contributions to this special issue are interested in how objects can complicate a historian's understanding of agency. Do things themselves act? Where are the lines between human, animal, object, text and image? The point is not to come up with a definitive answer of course. Rather, it is to contribute to a discussion which takes seriously the fluidity of the material world, and our relationship to it. From the humanization of material things—investing objects with human-like qualities or with subliminal powers—to the objectification of living things—animals in this collection, but also women, ethnic groups and other communities—the relationship between humans and the material world is rich, intimate, public, painful and constantly evolving. Smith's article on sheep takes us to the extremes of this question, but so, too, do Pooley's tarot cards: they urge us to think seriously about the agency and the power, of things.

Third, objects move in space and through time, inviting us to rescale categories of analysis beyond national boundaries and customary chronologies. By considering materiality as a central problem, we can look at transnational mobility and ongoing conservation (or degradation) beyond the boundaries of the nation-state, whilst still acknowledging that the conflictual objects which shape these discussions often can and will be framed in terms of national identity. Indeed, that focus on objects which spark and shape debate across borders and boundaries demands the recognition that objects can move us emotionally. The emotional relationship between humans—who make, use, break, hold, collect, ignore or work with objects—and material things is precisely what Stammers and Broch explore in their studies of very different, but equally impressive, collections. Ultimately this special issue offers a window into the history of post-revolutionary France as told not only by its historical actors, but by the objects which travelled through it.