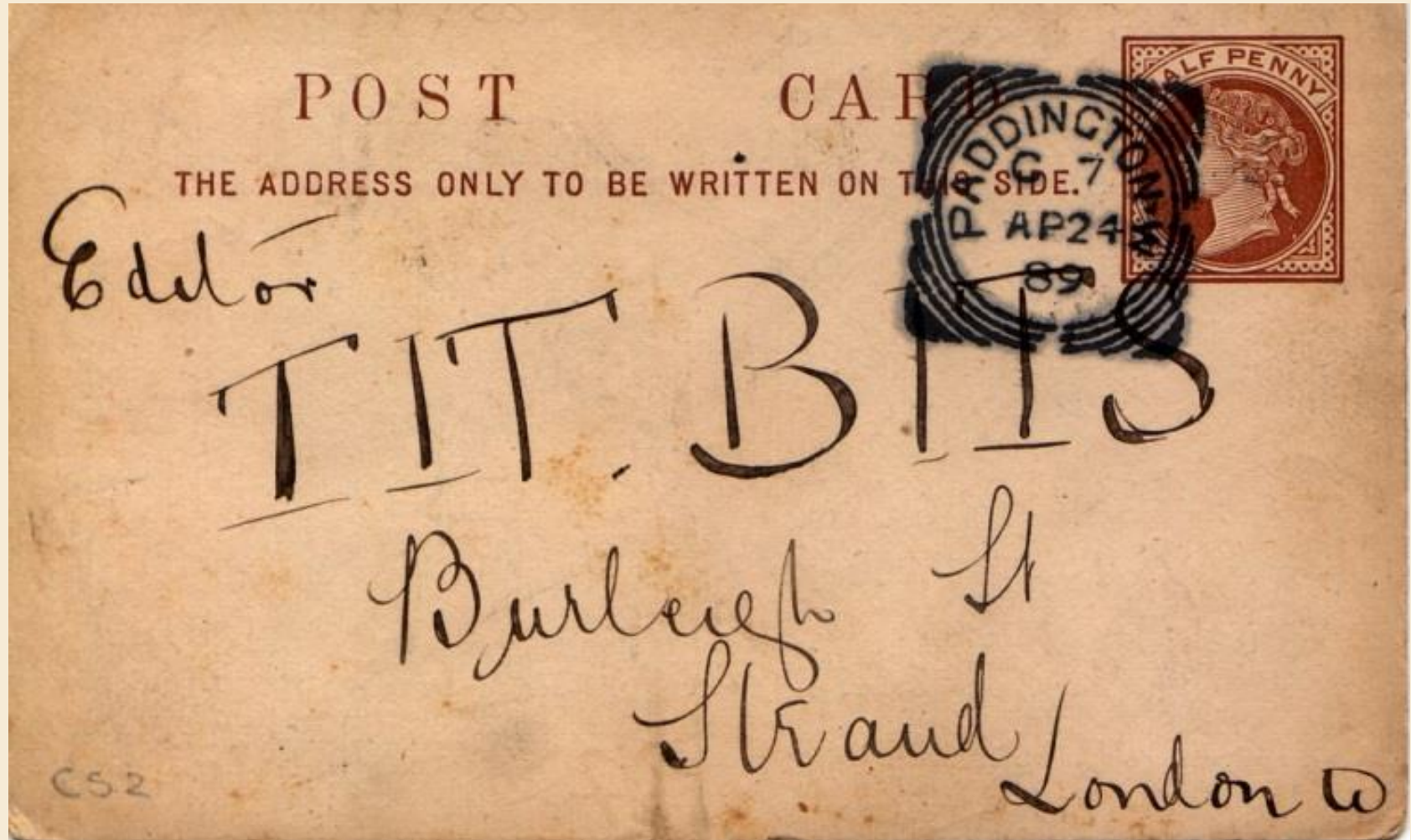


Introduction to Material Culture

Dr Catherine Feely



Workshop Outline

- What is material culture?
- Why use material culture?
- Theoretical approaches
- Methodological approaches
- Writing an object biography
- From the particular to the general

What is material culture?

In pairs or threes, you have five minutes to come up with a one-sentence definition of 'material culture' ...

After you've finished: was this easy to do?

What is material culture?

Changing relationships between:

- People
- Things
- Places
- Time

What is material culture?

“The study of material culture may be most broadly defined as the investigation of the relationship between people and things irrespective of time and space. The perspective adopted may be global or local, concerned with the past or the present, or the mediation between the two. Defined in this manner, the potential range of contemporary disciplines involved in some way or other in studying material culture is effectively as wide as the human and cultural sciences themselves.”

- Editorial of the first issue of the *Journal of Material Culture*, March 1996.

Why use material culture sources?

In pairs or threes, discuss the following:

- What type of material culture sources have you used/might you use in your work?
- Why did or might you use these sources? What is your motivation?
- What do you think material culture sources have added/might add to your work?
- Have you encountered/do you anticipate any problems in obtaining access to or interpreting these sources?

Some theoretical approaches

People and things, questions of agency, object/subject dualism, consumption, commodification.

- Actor-network theory (ANT). Key theorists: Bruno Latour; Alfred Gell; John Law.
- Non-representational theory. Key theorist: Nigel Thrift.
- ‘Thing theory’. Key theorist: Bill Brown.
- Dialectical/‘holist’ approach. Key theorist: Daniel Miller.
- Social life/cultural biography of things. Key theorists: Arjun Appadurai, Igor Kopytoff.

The theoretical ideas I explore ... derive from a dialectical perspective, in which material objects are viewed as an integral and inseparable aspect of all relationships. People exist for us in and through their material presence ... sometimes these apparently mute forms can be made to speak more easily and eloquently to the nature of relationships than can those with persons.”

- Daniel Miller, *The Comfort of Things* (2008), pp. 286-289.

“Where does the thing come from and who made it? What has been its career so far, and what do people consider to be an ideal career for such things? What are the recognised “ages” or periods in the thing’s “life,” and what are the cultural markers for them? How does the thing’s use change with its age, and what happens to it when it reaches the end of its usefulness?”

- Igor Kopytoff, ‘The cultural biography of things: commoditization as process’, in Appadurai (ed.), *The Social Life of Things* (1986), pp. 66-67.

Some methodological approaches

You might start with:

- People
 - A group of people (ethnography)
 - A particular person
- Things
 - A whole class of objects
 - A institutional or personal collection
 - A single object (object biography)
- A particular place
- A particular time

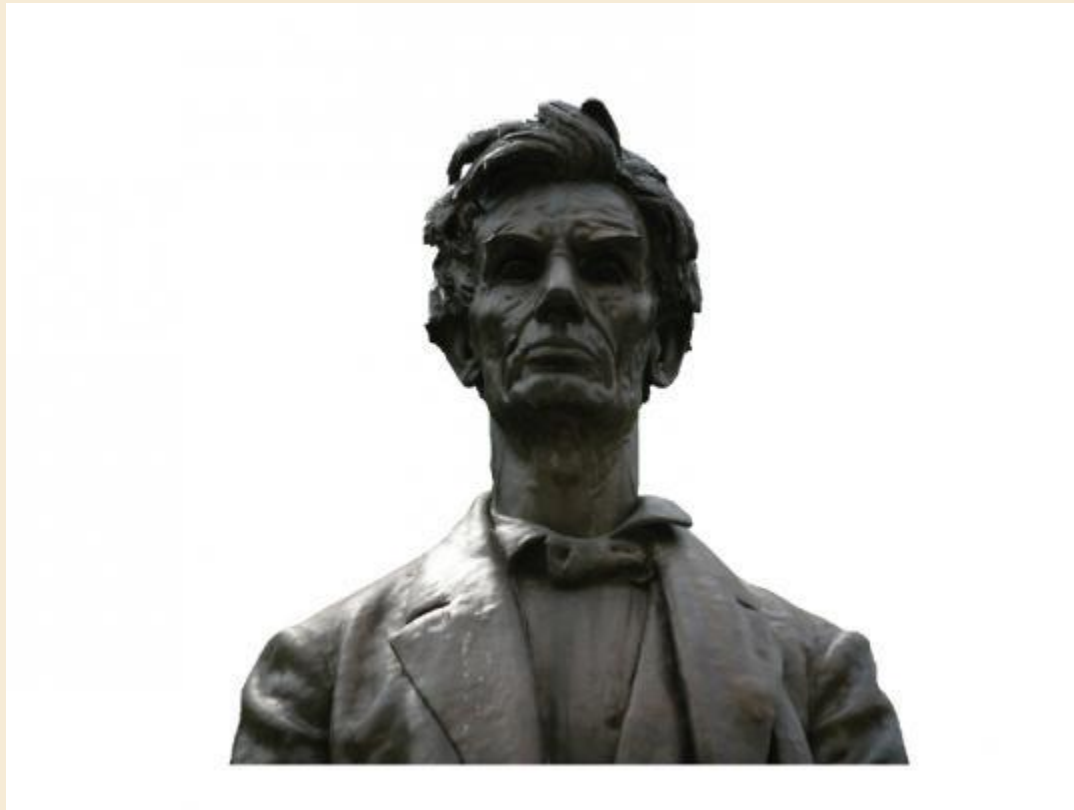
Example: Public Parks

Could focus on:

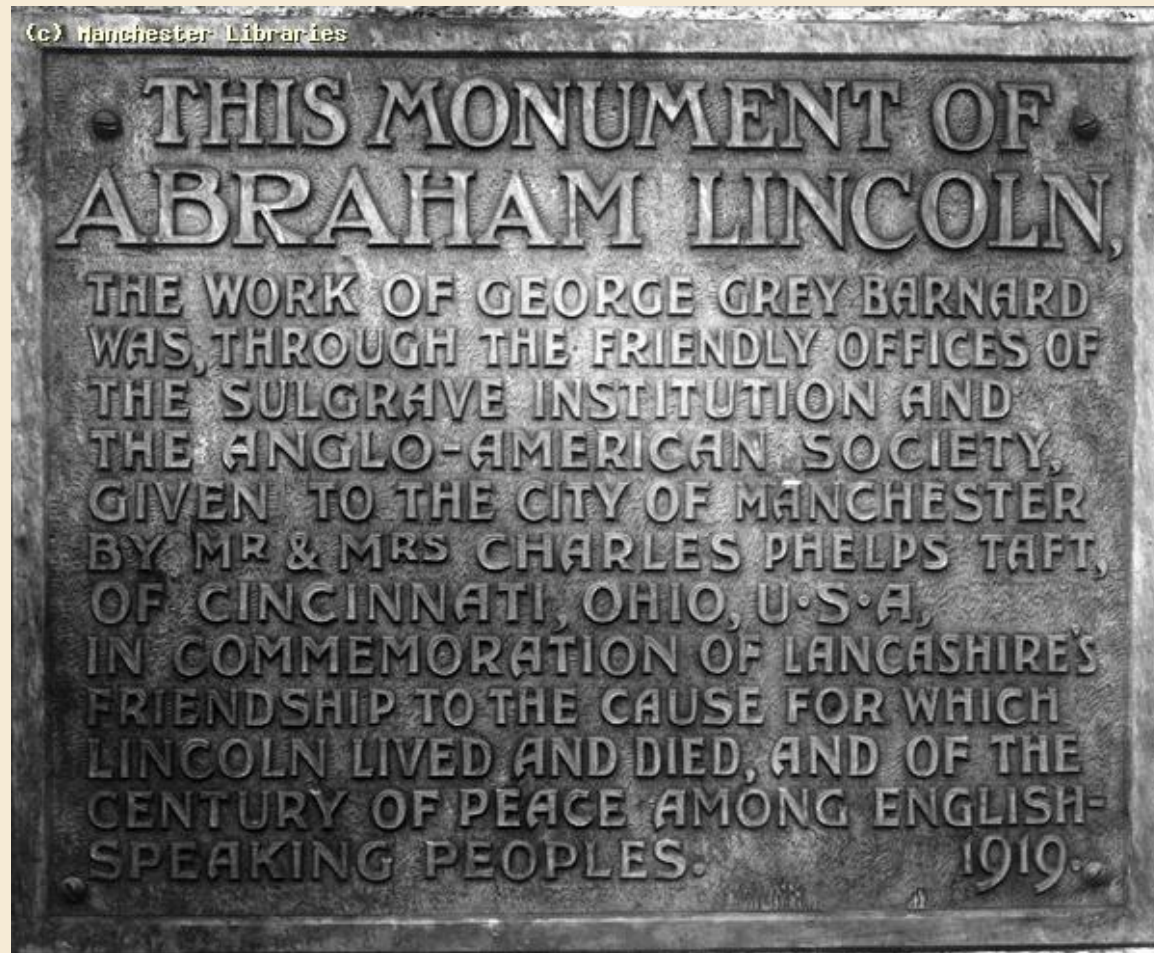
- People's experiences of using public parks (interviews, diaries, films, photos ...)
- The physical landscape or archaeology of the park/the use of a particular park at a particular time.
- The history of park benches.
- A particular park bench – its changing use and meaning over time.

Object Biography

Example: Abraham Lincoln Statue



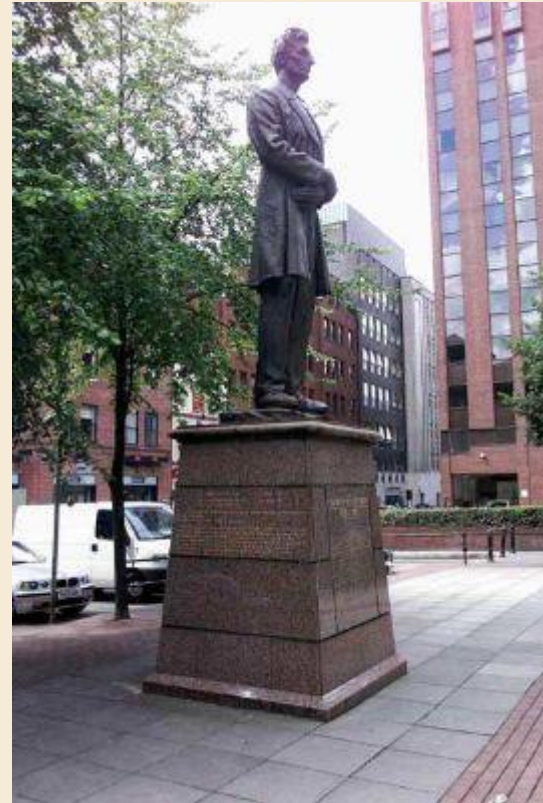
The inscription (1)



In Platt Fields



Spot the difference?



The inscription (2)

“This statue commemorates the support that the working people of Manchester gave in their fight for the abolition of slavery during the American Civil War. By supporting the union under president Lincoln at a time when there was an economic blockade of the southern states the Lancashire cotton workers were denied access to raw cotton which caused considerable unemployment throughout the cotton industry. Extracts of President Lincoln’s letter to the working people of Manchester thanking them for their help are reproduced around this plinth.”

Lincoln goes 'bling' ...



Object Biography

Now it's your turn:

What can you deduce from the objects themselves?

What else would you need to find out before you could write a proper biography of it?

How might you go about finding these things?

What methods would you use?

From the particular to the general

“I’d like to write something that comes from things the way wine comes from grapes.”

- Walter Benjamin, *On Hashish*, 1931.

- What are the problems of using this kind of method?
- How can we situate a single object within a larger argument or narrative?