

# Introduction

## Starting points

As in the present, so in the past, the sense of sight shapes experience. The material world is a visual world, which impacts upon human beings through their eyes, and is intimately bound up with touch. Historians can only benefit from approaching the past with a vivid appreciation of these points, with a willingness to consider what people looked at, how they looked and the roles of objects designed to be looked at. Sight has long been accorded privileged status: that the expression 'I see' means 'I understand' neatly reveals the point. The diversity and complexity of what was seen, and made to be seen, demands our attention. Texts, one element within the visual life of earlier times, play a dominant role in historical practice. In this book I explore how artefacts, which are seen, touched, made, displayed, bought and sold, and through these processes yoked to texts, can be turned to good account by historians.

In doing such work historians recognise that definitions and experiences change in fundamental ways, as do materials, skills and values. Thus ways of seeing themselves have altered, as have assumptions about how visual effects are achieved, and the agency of supernatural forces in images and objects. My focus is on that part of the material world that has been created by human beings in order to invite visual reactions. It comprises many, but by no means all, made things. I generally refer to them as artefacts, which could include items whose origins once posed a puzzle, such as fossils, and found objects, such as shells, placed in specially designed settings. 2 Artefacts mediate past ideas and experiences, making them ripe for historical analysis.



2 Scallop shell of a pilgrim from Santiago de Compostela, thirteenth century, Musée archéologique de Grenoble.

The scallop shell has long been a sign of pilgrimage, having initially been associated with those who returned from Santiago, the principal shrine to St James the Great in an area where scallops are plentiful. The holes in this example suggest it was attached to clothing. Such signs were widely recognised and metaphorically rich. Sir Walter Raleigh, in a poem written the day before his death in 1618, evoked the idea of a 'scallop-shell of quiet'.

I use the phrase 'the look of the past' to suggest that the appearances of things themselves constitute rich historical evidence, which merits careful evaluation. The veritable explosion of interest among historians in recent times in thinking visually indicates that such evaluation is well underway. In this book I set out some of the arguments to consider when we examine the look of items made and used in the past. Many of these – playing cards, inn signs, church interiors, coins and advertisements, for example, were probably seen by large swathes of the population. <sup>3</sup> At every social level, visually significant artefacts were ubiquitous. Not only did they help to mould ways of life, but many also expressed and commented upon contemporary issues in their own ways. Made items bear the imprint of

both makers and of their originating contexts, and it is reasonable to assume that many people noticed and responded to their visual properties. Artefacts, then, may be treated as providing historical testimony and of diverse kinds. When historians deploy such testimony, it helps to be as clear as possible about the claims that are being made. My principal purpose is to work towards such clarity.

Many objects and images were produced by specialists, such as artists, engravers, sculptors, designers, potters, furniture-makers and so on. These are diverse occupations, and those who practised them were producers with differing commitments to, and investments in, visual effects. But they all used their honed visual intelligence and skills, such as manual dexterity, to produce items they wanted to be looked at and appreciated. Whatever their social status, they were masters of looking, who paid careful and conscious attention to the visual properties of their products. Considerable problem-solving was often involved: choosing the right materials, selecting an appropriate design, developing visual idioms to suit particular markets and so on. These specialists contributed directly to the look of past and while going about their business, they inevitably engaged with artefacts from previous eras. The look of their pasts was often present, in a mediated form, in what they made. Workshop traditions, and an awareness of the achievements of earlier generations, along with a sense of clients' requirements, shaped their endeavours. While it is important to recognise that some makers were more concerned with visual effects than others, useful, everyday objects – the appearance of which was shaped by practical considerations, such as the cost of materials and labour – benefit from the careful attention given to more obviously 'aesthetic' items. Thus it is always worth asking about the visual properties of made items and exploring their potential for generating

historical insights, while recognising that those possessing greater complexity and fashioned with higher levels of awareness may yield historical insights more readily.

People in the past had their own ways of observing and interpreting what they saw. Sometimes there is direct evidence of this, in writings that told people how to read facial expressions or hand gestures, for example. Cf. 42 Any records of past modes of looking can be used to study the ways in which visual experience was understood and has altered. These issues arose in many places, such as theories of the visual arts, conduct books, discussions of performances, manuals on how to preach, as well as in literary works, including plays, poetry and novels and unpublished sources, letters and diaries, for instance. Written materials help reveal ways in which looking was important in past societies and attended to by many constituencies. Probing the look of the past involves paying close attention to words as well as to images and objects, and to the relationships between what historians see and what was seen in the past. We acknowledge, then, that vision has a history, and that objects necessarily played a central role within it.

## Assumptions

All historical works rest on assumptions, some of which their authors recognise and avow, while others are so deeply embedded that they are difficult to bring up for critical inspection. I outline my own briefly here to enable readers to take account of them in the following pages. The use of images and objects as historical evidence turns out to be a topic that elicits strong feelings. Perhaps this is connected with anxieties about their reliability, especially given the allure some images and objects are known to exercise. I argue that such forms of seduction can be turned to good effect and need not deter historians from engagement with sources that are numerous, diverse and eloquent, and neither more nor less 'reliable' than other forms of evidence. My own responses guided the choice of example for the four short essays and acted as a spur to curiosity. This approach is perfectly compatible with a systematic examination of the objects in question, which demands the deliberate management of personal responses. I further assume that, when possible, such examination should begin with first-hand knowledge of the item in question. The internet is useful as a reminder, but not as a substitute for direct looking, which allows viewers to appreciate texture, dimensions and scale – features that prompt visual analysis.



**3** Coin, of the denomination known as an angel, 1606–7, gold, 4.48 grammes, British Museum. The ubiquity, diversity and visual properties of coins make them of general interest to historians. When portraits are included they provide the most common representations of human heads. This example is from the reign of James I of England and is pierced for use in the ceremony of touching for the King's Evil. French and English monarchs were thought to be able to cure scrofula by touching sufferers. In such an artefact, the special powers of rulers are doubly affirmed, by the coin being issued in their name and by the modification connected with a ritual that manifested their divine attributes.

One fundamental assumption of *The Look of the Past* is that a historical account containing diverse evidence is a worthy goal for the discipline. My ideal is an integrative form of history – the past itself was hardly divided up in the ways contemporary historical practices imply. Developing an integrative approach is not about quantity – more rather than fewer sources – but about bringing a range of types and genres of evidence together meaningfully. If any given theme – fear of degeneration, celebration of motherhood, critique of luxury, for example – is present not just in institutions, but also in literature, memoirs, treatises and newspapers, it is worth pursuing that range of evidence, tracking the commonalities and differences. A fuller and more convincing historical account should result from this range, as it does from considering prints, medals and buildings, paintings, textiles and pottery as integral to our understanding of past phenomena. When working in this way historians track imaginative processes in the past, using their own in a disciplined manner in order to do so.

I further assume that when historians use visual and material evidence, it is worth being explicit about how and why, so that their workings are available for critical inspection. I therefore seek to spell out the kinds of reasoning involved. This approach risks stating the obvious, but that is preferable to being vague about how a visual source contributes to an argument or why an image is placed where it is in a publication. I endeavour to discuss the issues that arise when historians use objects and images in language that is as plain as possible. There are many introductions to visual culture, art history and material culture that set out a range of theoretical approaches and debates and outline the principal methods deployed. I take another tack, and use either specific objects or themes and concepts as my focus. By the end of the volume, readers will have been exposed to the basic issues that, in my view, the use of visual and material evidence raises for historians.

The significance of visual and material culture in people's lives and the existence of both major shifts and continuities in attitudes to objects are hardly in doubt. I am assuming that a broad case can be made for their value and relevance; hence the task of historians is to mobilise such evidence as effectively as possible, making clear their assumptions and moves. The items that fall into the categories 'visual and material culture' are strikingly diverse; as a result it is not always possible to generalise about how they are best used. Accordingly, conceptualising their precise historical pertinence in each case is a worthwhile exercise and this is what the short essays are designed to do. So, this volume aims to offer helpful suggestions and examples, both by laying out the bigger issues and by discussing specific instances. Yet there are general observations to be made, and they may be found throughout the book and underpinning

them are some key beliefs. For example, I find the notion of mediation indispensable. Objects act as mediators; they cannot be simple reflections of an independent state of affairs, a point that applies as much to photography, for example, as to painting. Every made item results from human attention and skill; when ideas pass through consciousness and social practices – these are entwined – they are transformed in the process. This is as true of a child's drawing or a homemade garment as it is of artisanal products or acclaimed works of art. It follows that historians will find languages that stress active change, such as translation and transformation, more helpful than those evoking passivity, of which 'reflection' is the prime example.

The precise significance with which objects are endowed varies markedly with time and place, and within a given society. Yet the assumption that some artefacts are capable of embodying people and attributes is remarkably widespread, making the notion of embodiment analytically useful. Portraits, for example, are taken to stand for and evoke the person depicted. They can substitute for them after death or during their absence: both literally and metaphorically a portrait can embody a person. Similar phenomena are at work in relics and icons, in objects used during a Christian Mass and a coronation service. **III** The relationships between human beings and certain potent objects, which embodiment expresses, constitute major historical phenomena, ones that have been picked up in literature when writers, such as Nathaniel Hawthorne and Oscar Wilde, have explored the magical powers with which some objects and images have been endowed. People invest things with elaborate meanings, which, as we know from the case of souvenirs, do not depend upon them being expensive or made from precious materials: working out how this happens is of central importance for the field of history.

Through production processes, as well as through subsequent transactions and forms of display and use, meanings are added to materials. Some substances may already be resonant, as gold, alabaster and gemstones were. Historians who use artefacts engage with the people who made, handled, traded and used them. It is through such agents that images and objects have active lives, acquire power and are esteemed. It seems that myths around making are as old as human societies, which suggests something of the significance of this activity, especially when the results are highly valued, rare, symbolically dense or endowed with extraordinary powers. The story of the sculptor Pygmalion, told in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, is a case in point. He made a statue of a woman so beautiful that he fell in love with her, and Venus, the goddess of love, granted his wish that the woman come to life.

Historians are generally eclectic creatures, and I am no exception. There are numerous tools and approaches that we can use, and it is

incumbent on us to select them thoughtfully and in an informed manner. For instance, I have found art history to be a rich source of ideas, approaches and conceptual frameworks. It is itself a diverse discipline, encompassing a range of practices and theories, and one that can be generative for historians. In addition, I draw on other perspectives and fields as and when I find them useful. There can be no single method or approach for doing the sorts of work I explore here. They begin with careful looking and move on to description, analysis, contextualisation and comparison. Such operations are effective because artefacts arise out of social relationships, acting as mediators, not as mirrors, and can become dense with meanings, habits and conventions. Given the heterogeneity of the material worlds, these features are present in different ways and to diverse degrees, as it is our job to discover.

## Decisions

The secondary literature that pertains to the themes of this book, like the primary sources that are potentially relevant to the look of the past, is simply vast. Difficult decisions had to be made to keep its scope manageable. Accordingly I excluded film, partly because an extensive literature exists about its role in historical practice. I only touch on media studies briefly when discussing audiences. While I use the idea of visual culture, visual culture *studies* with its focus on the present and most recent past, is not my primary concern here, although I am indebted to much recent work in the field, which is cited as appropriate. I draw most of my examples from 1600 onwards, because those who work on earlier periods, and have fewer sources at their disposal, have been inspiring pioneers when it comes to blending visual and material evidence into historical accounts and have long practised integrative forms of history. It seems that as sources proliferate the closer we get to the present, the harder it is to achieve such thorough integration. For practical reasons, most of my examples are drawn from Europe and North America, the geographical areas upon which I have previously worked. Furthermore, there are many types of artefact that are not mentioned here, such as arms and armour, vehicles, games and toys. The forms of argument mooted here can, however, be applied to any made item. A book such as this is inevitably the result of pragmatic decisions and authorial preferences.

## Key themes

A number of themes that run through *The Look of the Past* are mentioned here so that readers can look out for them and reflect upon them.



They raise broad questions about historical practice and the relationships between scholars and sources. The first is agency, and in particular the ways historians can use productively the fact that the form and function of every artefact have passed through the minds and bodies of people who exercised choice in the past. Acts of patronage, exchange and display entail agency too. Like consumers, makers of objects and images manifest forms of visual intelligence, preferences and skills, which entitle them to be understood as historical actors, as witnesses to past states of affairs. Many different kinds of agency are involved, offering correspondingly rich historical opportunities. A significant proportion of made things was designed to elicit visual reactions. My second theme, then, is spectators' responses, which, although they may be difficult to document, are of major historical importance. How do we understand and conceptualise such reactions, and find evidence of audiences? How are potential audiences imagined by makers when they are working?

Third, I consider the skills that are needed for working closely with images and objects, which is an interdisciplinary and comparative enterprise. In keeping with the whole tenor of the book, I seek to be as explicit as possible about the range of skills involved, including the ability to describe, and then analyse and contextualise, visual evidence. In the process, historians generate verbal accounts. Everything, analytically speaking, is carried in the words used to describe, explain and interpret the evidence that artefacts present. So, the fourth theme could be summed up as 'word and image'. Translations, indeed all the intricate dynamics between these modes, are central to current forms of historical practice that involve thinking with the eyes, as they have been to people in the past.

The fifth theme concerns what I think of as the problem of levels. It is a characteristic of the discipline of history that it ranges between and connects phenomena that are concrete and abstract, local, national and international, individual and collective. Clear and convincing articulations between these levels are required. Nowhere is this more pressing than in the case of artefacts, which, if they are to be integrated into historical accounts, need to be linked to more abstract phenomena and also to explanatory frameworks. The role of theory in historical practice, a related matter, is the sixth theme snaking through the book. The fields that specialise in studying visual and material culture give more prominence to theory than most historians do, for whom it is frequently no more than a part of the philosophy of history that has little to do with their business as usual. Those who are interested in historical theory have shown surprisingly little concern for probing the conceptual challenges of working with visual and material culture, for analysing their

place within the discipline of history or for learning from theoretical reflection in adjacent fields.

The final theme is the ethical dimensions of using non-written evidence. When historians work with artefacts, they incur the same obligations as when deploying written and spoken evidence, which are managed through acknowledgements, footnotes, bibliographies and permissions. Adaptations of these devices help to cultivate a careful, engaged visual attention that is the opposite of the unthinking use of illustrations, which, regrettably, remains common. It is always worth analysing how images are used in publications, as this reveals the attitudes of authors and publishers to visual and material evidence.

## Terminology

Finding the most generative vocabularies and apt analytical terms is vital for historians who use visual and material evidence. Given the heterogeneity of images and objects, I often use the terms 'visual culture' and 'material culture' as catchalls. But they carry distinctive connotations, largely because disciplines are now organised around them and they stand in implied contrast to other terms, such as art and archaeology. For example, 'visual culture' implies a study that is more inclusive than art history, since 'art' suggests aesthetic entry requirements. Sometimes, 'visual culture' indicates an interest in contemporary phenomena, such as film, television and advertising and debates concerning their interpretation. In this sense it overlaps with media studies and film studies, which are rightly concerned to give popular culture its due. 'Visual culture' includes design, fashion and photography as well as art: not only is it inclusive, but it is also open to theoretical perspectives from the social sciences, post-modernism and critical theory. It is possible to use the phrase 'visual culture', which generally signals an interest in working across media, in a more explicitly historical manner, to suggest the array of items at a given place and time that possess visual interest. **IV**

'Material culture' is even more generously inclusive in implying any made item, especially those in three dimensions. Material culture *studies*, with its close relationships with archaeology and anthropology, has been informed by the social sciences, and also by traditions that study artefacts in everyday life. It recognises the dynamism of objects as they change location and hands. Aesthetic criteria are relatively unimportant. The most ordinary objects come under the category 'material culture', items that are as important for the way they feel and are used as for how they are looked at. Geographers, with their preoccupation with the social organisation of space, have been drawn to the study of material



culture, while social theorists are interested in 'stuff' in general. I use 'material culture' inclusively, especially when I want to suggest the diversity of objects that historians can consider, while my priority remains the possibilities for analysing their appearance.

Although they possess distinct resonances, there are important points of overlap between 'visual culture' and 'material culture'. For example, apart from dreams and visions, most images are 'material'; a picture is generally also an object. I use 'image', a more complex notion than is immediately apparent, to refer to many forms of representation, and vary the terms in a quest to avoid tiresome repetition. When I speak of objects, things, items, artefacts or pieces, I am excluding neither most images nor buildings. V Although buildings are in many respects unlike objects made by an individual or a small number of people, I hope that my approach works with architecture, as the first essay aims to show. Architectural history tends to operate as a distinct specialised field, but there is no reason why it should be not further integrated into mainstream history.

Even seemingly innocent terms such as 'craft' and 'design' are freighted with assumptions about social status, with the 'fine' arts generally accorded more cultural prestige than the 'decorative' ones. Similar issues of hierarchy apply to 'artist' and 'artisan', and where possible and appropriate I opt for a more neutral word, such as 'maker' or 'producer'. Beyond rough categories such as 'art' and 'craft', more detailed languages of description and further forms of classification are needed. It is possible to turn to materials and medium, genre and date, beginning an account with such basic information. Technical precision is also required, so that the print method, for example, needs to be given its proper name. Then it is necessary to speak of colours, shapes, composition and so on, and we necessarily have recourse to metaphor. Even seemingly straightforward tasks, such as the use of style terms, 'baroque' and 'neo-classical' for instance, to classify objects, turn out to be fraught with complexities. Historians are wordsmiths by trade, and we need to be especially attentive, meticulous and imaginative in our use of language, especially when drawing upon a range of disciplines. Accordingly, *The Look of the Past* is about the ways historians talk and write about things, as well as about how the past was experienced visually and is transmitted to us through the sense of sight.

## Interpretation

There are innumerable ways of talking and writing about visual experiences and the phenomena that generate them, which are shaped by authors'

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-88242-2 - The Look of the Past: Visual and Material Evidence in Historical Practice

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Excerpt

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4 'Nur die Ruhe kann es machen'

('Gently does it'), acquired 1919, 90 cm wide × 47.8 cm high, Cambridge University Library. This intriguing poster is printed on the back of a map of Belgium. The slogan may also be translated as 'take it easy' and was a common expression of the time, including in popular songs.

The text on the left-hand side reads: 'Save small-arms fire for the Tommies behind the tanks'; and on the right: 'The artillery will deal with any tanks that get through'. Thus the poster was presumably aimed at German soldiers in training.

commitments and preferences and the contexts in which they operate. I do not advocate a particular method or approach here, except insofar as paying careful, focused attention to items of visual and material culture is the indispensable foundation for taking them seriously. Historians will interpret them in a range of ways, as they do texts, periods and places. These processes are commonly evoked through the idea of 'reading'. While notions of interpretation may be widely applied, we might well avoid using terms that simply assume the similarities between, say, books and images, as they can distract attention from the distinctive ways in which visual media work. 'Reading' is sometimes taken to imply that there are 'messages' to be decoded, which downplays the ambiguity and complexities of both artefacts and texts. Images designed to persuade, as in propaganda and advertising, may have been intended to convey 'messages', yet even they frequently work at a number of levels. 4 The model of reading messages is too reductive to do justice to many visual and material sources.

The point about 'messages' is especially important because of the dramatic recent growth in public history. The major role of museums, galleries, parks and other visitor attractions in communicating aspects of the past depends upon the display of artefacts and the inculcation of a sense of the past through visual experience. Simplified 'messages' abound. It is essential that historians are able to critique such installations from an informed position. Thus I hope *The Look of the Past* will make a contribution to the critical evaluation of public history and the interpretations offered there.