

Colonialism, Consumption and Material Culture

ARHS 5358

Prof. Beatriz E. Balanta

Fall 2018: Thursdays, Owen 1635, 2:00 – 4:50 pm



George Washington's Dentures (circa 1789)

<https://www.mountvernon.org/library/digitalhistory/digital-encyclopedia/article/false-teeth/>

One of the most important triumphs of capitalism is to convince us that we cannot live without things. This course responds to the need to understand how capitalism engenders desire for an astounding array of stuff. We begin with the assertion that objects are entities that *mediate* and *activate* social relations. By examining the social and historical “life” of mundane and luxurious artifacts such as—soap, furniture, cloth, and photographs—we begin to discover how, through a series of discourses and practices, objects come to syncopate our lives. We will review theoretical approaches to objects, especially those that focus on colonialism and empire making, fetishism, and the birth of consumer society to examine how objects are produced, circulated, negotiated, and integrated into the everyday life of humans. In other words, we will analyze the political and symbolic economies that energize objects. Moreover, our investigation of things will be guided by a critical examination of the relation of consumption to configurations of the body, racial and gender discourses, and national mythologies. Interdisciplinary in nature, *Colonialism, Consumption, and Material Culture* applies theories and methods from a broad field of disciplines such as history, postcolonial theory, visual culture, and feminism and gender studies in order to decipher the intricacies of material culture and consumption: the practices, relations, and rituals through which things become valuable, meaningful, and useful.