



TOUCHING HISTORY

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TOUCHING HISTORY

MATERIAL CULTURE AT WEST POINT



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Cadets in Maj. Justine M. Meberg's *History of the United States* class gathered around as she held up a strange wooden cylinder with brass caps on each end and a small brass plaque in its center. She explained that they would use the cylinder to begin their lesson on the Mexican War, and that she would tell them three stories about the object. These tales would launch the class into a discussion about the war and its consequences. Before she began, cadets had an opportunity to interact with the object—a portion of the flagstaff that General Winfield Scott's army had captured after storming Chapultepec, a fortification on the outer edge of Mexico City. They touched the weathered wood and the polished brass, and they noted the plaque that described how the brass ends came from captured Mexican muskets that the Americans had melted down.

Then, the stories began. First, Major Meberg told cadets how American units had won the fight for Chapultepec and how Scott claimed the flagstaff as a

war trophy. He then donated it to West Point, commemorating the military contributions of academy graduates and marking the Mexican War's place in American military memory. Next, she described how Mexico also considered this battle to be an important site. According to legend, several young Mexican cadets refused to evacuate from the *colegio militar* (military academy) located in Chapultepec and instead fought the American advance. One of the students, Juan Escutia, was said to have taken the Mexican flag down from the flagstaff, wrapped it around his body, and leaped to his death rather than allow it to fall into enemy hands. The story of the *Niños Héroes*—the “Young Heroes” who fought to the death rather than surrender—helped Mexico to remember the battle and marked the moment when the Mexican military academy became the Heroico Colegio Militar in honor of the cadets' bravery.

Finally, the students heard how raising the American flag on Chapultepec's flagstaff

was the signal Col. William S. Harney had been waiting for. When he saw it, he gave the order to hang thirty men, members of the *Batallón de San Patricio* (St. Patrick's Battalion)—named for its Irish contingent—who had deserted the U.S. Army to fight for Mexico.¹ Cadets went on to discuss how the war fit into national memory in both the United States and Mexico and how nativism influenced a Regular Army where most of the enlisted men were immigrants. They also tackled the paradox of how victories in Mexico increased American nationalism in many ways but also contributed to the disunity that ended in the Civil War. The role of the flagstaff in this history class demonstrates the effectiveness of material culture as a pedagogical tool—and also shows the evolution of the West Point Material Culture Team.

Material culture is “the study through artifacts of the beliefs—values, ideas, attitudes, and assumptions—of a particular community or society at a given time.”²



An aerial view of the U.S. Military Academy at West Point *Army Times*

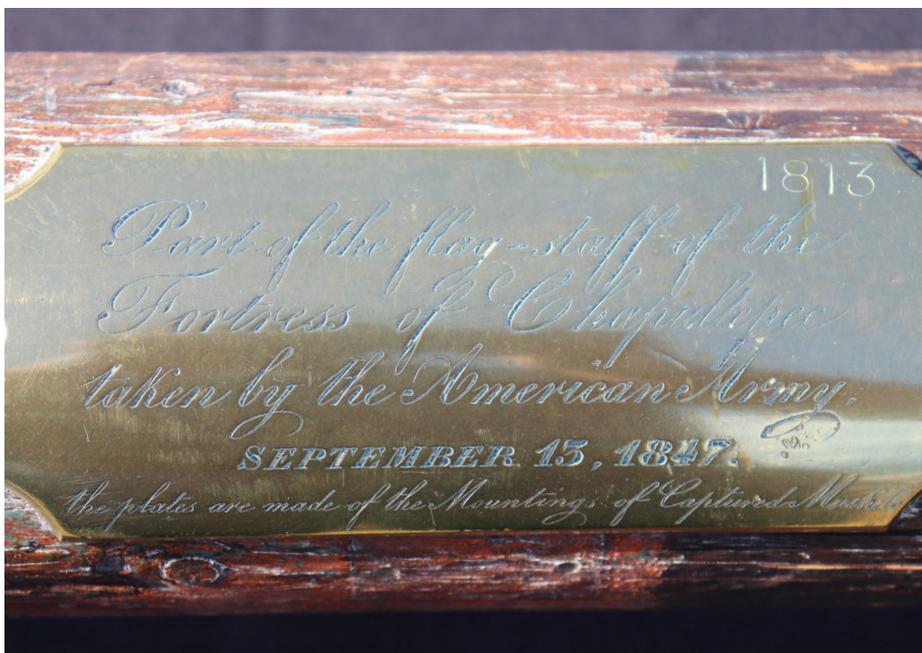


The West Point Museum *U.S. Military Academy*

It is both a method of historical inquiry and a pedagogical approach. Historians are accustomed to connecting with primary sources in archives, but students and teachers sometimes struggle to bring history off the page. The Department of History at West Point initiated a material culture program in 2018 to deepen cadet education. The program began by bringing objects from the West Point Museum collection into the classroom. Material culture professionals engage the cadets' senses in learning history, thereby creating unique, powerful, and unexpected connections in their education. Putting students into direct contact with a bugle, or a coat, or a saber encourages them to hear, see, and touch history. These interactions help students to approach history with a curious and open mind. History courses that use material culture weave historical narratives and objects into opportunities for cadets to learn history more effectively. By bringing material culture into the



Justine M. Meberg, shown here as a captain, holds a portion of Chapultepec's flagstaff. *U.S. Military Academy*



The brass plaque on Chapultepec's flagstaff *U.S. Military Academy*

classroom, we can encourage students to critically examine their assumptions, confront their biases, and experience history anew.

The West Point Material Culture Team uses these concepts to create material culture studies specific to the military academy. Material culture, in a broad sense, allows a teacher to make fresh connections between the students and the course content. However, we have applied the academy's focus on developing leaders of character to create a unique version of material culture driven by empathetic leadership. Using material culture in a West Point classroom reveals cadets' assumptions and cultural perspectives and helps them comprehend different systems of belief. This practice helps cadets to learn how they each attach meaning to objects in personal ways and also provides a forum to discuss these differences.

Although the Department of History at West Point has a long tradition of bringing historic weapons to class to support instruction in the military arts, it recently expanded the understanding of material culture as a mode of scholarly investigation. Our Material Culture Team consists of scholars from both the history department and the West Point Museum. They collaborate to help faculty and students gain a deeper appreciation of the value that historical objects can offer to our instruction. We are not alone in using material culture for student education, but we do believe that our focus on helping cadets gain critical competencies for building inclusive teams is unique.³

Our department's use of material culture would not be possible without the world-class support of the West Point Museum. The team of curators led by David M. Reel goes above and beyond to accomplish this mission. They regularly transport unique, compelling, and often fragile objects to our classrooms for interactive instruction. Curators are regular guests in our classes, providing expert knowledge of art, uniforms, weapons, and more. Building on West Point's special traditions, history of service, and modern mission, we will offer a brief survey of what this innovative concept looks like in practice. The authors have contributed to a discussion of material culture at West Point and they outline exciting aspects of their approach to this unique discipline, which include West Point's strong emphasis on engaging with the material world, the mechanics of partnering with the West Point Museum,



John Richard Coke Smyth, *Indians Bartering*, lithograph U.S. Military Academy

and the ways in which the program will grow in the coming years.

A TRADITION OF ENGAGEMENT WITH THE MATERIAL WORLD

In 1842, all cadets at West Point were required to take a drawing course under the supervision of the famed painter of the Hudson River School, Robert Walter Weir. Weir, whose *Embarkation of the Pilgrims* hangs today in the U.S. Capitol Rotunda, included in his course the task of mechanically reproducing works of other artists. In the days before photography and video, the skill of accurately

reproducing images and landscapes by drawing them was considered essential for the battlefield. This training was especially desirable for the many engineer officers the antebellum military academy produced.

As a cadet enrolled in Weir's drawing class, Ulysses S. Grant was given the assignment of reproducing a lithograph of John Richard Coke Smyth, titled "Indians Bartering," from a collection published in Smyth's 1839 book, *Sketches in the Canadas*.⁴ Grant painstakingly reproduced the lithograph, capturing the details of the original work with great accuracy. Yet Grant's copy holds a vibrancy absent in Smyth's version.

Ulysses S. Grant's reproduction of *Indians Bartering* U.S. Military Academy



For example, the blanket offered by the trader takes on a striking blue and white color in Grant's version, compared to the original tan. The mother's hair falls more naturally around her face, while the man sits with a slightly more straight and dignified posture. Even the furs of the dog and the pelts appear warmer and more textured in Grant's reproduction.

A cadet's grade in mechanical drawing depended on their faithfulness to reproduction, not on their creative expression, and Grant received a middling grade in the class, being ranked nineteen out of forty by Weir at the end of the year.⁵ What is clear, however, is that Grant was engaging his senses in the "cultural empathy" that Jules D. Prown argues is the heart of material culture studies. He spent long hours staring at the details of "Indians Bartering," painstakingly replicating a scene that is an idealized encounter of two cultures. Grant would of course go on to be one of the most important graduates West Point ever produced, both as a Civil War general and as president of the United States. As president, Grant would make critical decisions on Native American policy.

In hindsight, his drawing echoes the idealized vision with which Grant approached Native American policy. Using this drawing in a West Point classroom today offers opportunities to contrast the peaceful intent in Grant's depiction with the realities of the reservation system he supported and the wars he approved to keep Indians on them. An instructor might also use the drawing to explore the complex attitude of Army officers toward frontier service and fighting in the Indian Wars. Our process of cultural empathy would then echo Grant's encounter with material culture, when he closely interacted with the lithograph of "Indians Bartering." This is an important point in understanding the heart of material culture studies at West Point. The scholars training cadets in this discipline are not creating something new, but building on part of West Point's 200-year history. Grant's lithograph, an assignment that reflected his era's instructional focus on recitation and reproduction, can be used today to challenge students, explore multiple perspectives, and engage in discussion.

PARTNERING WITH THE WEST POINT MUSEUM

The Department of History at West Point has a long-standing relationship with the West Point Museum—a collaboration that has

yielded strong dividends over the years. This relationship was enhanced with the creation of the Material Culture Team in late 2018. The team is responsible for coordination between the Department and the Museum and makes the necessary arrangements to transport objects from the Museum's collection to the classroom. Instructors work with members of the Material Culture Team to search the collection and request items that they feel would be most effective for their lesson objectives. Depending on the item, or an instructor's request, a curator will accompany the object to ensure proper handling and provide additional information regarding the object. This collaboration between the Museum and the Department enables instructors to bring history to life in the classroom. A few examples demonstrate the richness of this educational innovation.

The traditional use of material objects in the West Point classroom has been in military history instruction. Here, the objects stimulate the senses and help instructors craft their lessons to convey a sense of the battlefields past. For example, cadets enrolled in the *History of the Military Art from 1904 to 2013* have often struggled to move beyond simplistic understandings of trench warfare during lessons on World War I. Instructor Maj. Edwin C. den Harder overcame this difficulty by bringing a German Maschinengewehr 08 (MG08) machine gun to class. The MG08 illustrates the machine guns used by the various powers at war in 1914. When brought into the classroom, cadets are not just shown the weapon. They can handle it and the sled it rested on and experience the significant weight of both. As cadets compare this cumbersome weapon to the modern machine guns they have carried during their training, they quickly realize the constraints this weight imposed upon a soldier's mobility. This realization fosters a discussion of the tactical and operational problems posed by trench warfare and how neither side could break the deadlock on the Western Front until 1918.

Material culture can also go beyond weapons. In *The Army of the Republic: Leading Citizen Soldiers*, Major Meberg helps cadets imagine being a Revolutionary War soldier by examining their clothing. A central issue of revolutionary historiography is the role of the militia in helping the United States achieve victory. To facilitate this, Major Meberg brings in two mannequins from the museum dressed in reproduction uniforms. One mannequin wears a typical Conti-



Cadets discuss early styles of uniforms U.S. Military Academy

mental Army uniform and the other wears a hunting shirt and other items common to a militiaman. The two mannequins stand at opposite ends of the classroom with a line drawn on the chalkboard between them, with "Regulars" and "Militia" marking the ends. Written underneath the line is the question, "who won the revolution?" Major Meberg introduces the lesson with a brief clip from the musical *Hamilton*, "The World Turned Upside Down (Yorktown)." The video features the same kind of buff and blue coat in the classroom, creating an immediate sensory connection to the lesson.

She then draws the cadets' attention back to the uniforms and juxtaposes the wool of the Continental coat with the linen of the hunting shirt. Major Meberg argues that these two objects serve as a tactile metaphor for the regular and militia understandings of why the United States won the war. The regulars claimed it was because they formed solid battle lines, holding firm like the thick wool coat. The militia claimed it was because they executed raids and harassment actions with agility, moving lightly like the linen hunting shirt.⁶ The coat and hunting shirt allow cadets to use their senses and build a connection to the past.

Cadets have time to interact with the uniforms, consider the wool and linen metaphor, and initial their position on the chalk spectrum. Next, they discuss a variety of opinions. Who thinks the militia won, why, and drawing on what evidence? Who thinks the regulars won? Some cadets change their position on the chalk line as

the discussion progresses. As this question becomes more fully explored, Major Meberg complicates the simple binary of regular/militia traditions by introducing the role of privateers. The discussion ranges from there into a survey of the major civil-military episodes of the Revolutionary era, including the Newburgh Conspiracy, Washington's Newburgh Address, and controversy over organizations like the Society of the Cincinnati. The discussion pushes even further into the major themes of the early Republic. Major Meberg contends that the regular/militia dilemma foreshadows the larger debate of Federalists and Republicans. She lays the groundwork for the next lesson when cadets will be asked to unravel the seeming paradox of why the archetypal Republican president, Thomas Jefferson, founded the seemingly Federalist United States Military Academy.

The regular/militia distinction also allows for a nuanced understanding of the required reading for the lesson: James Kirby Martin and Mark Edward Lender's *"A Respectable Army": The Military Origins of the Republic, 1763-1789* (Malden, Mass., 2015). The authors underscore the fundamental irony that the least republican institution won the independence of the American republic.⁷ The regular uniform's obvious similarities to British uniforms make this apparent and help cadets grasp and evaluate the arguments of both the authors and the instructor. The students glean all of this from a few, relatively

simple objects hanging on mannequins in the corners of Major Meberg's classroom. Watching cadets engage in such immediate and high-level discussion, only weeks into their plebe (first) year, demonstrates our belief that material culture is a groundbreaking pedagogical tool.

GAINING MOMENTUM

The discipline of material culture is already having a tremendous impact on how history is taught at West Point. We are most excited, however, about what lies ahead. The Department of History is overseeing multiple initiatives that will bear fruit over the next several years. These include fostering cadet research using material culture as primary sources, the evolution and expansion of material culture lesson packages for every core history course, the growth of an online repository of material culture knowledge, and the integration of material culture resources from outside organizations.

Over the past year, our team has met with leading scholars of material culture to learn more about the discipline. These meetings have made clear that West Point is in a unique position to bring this discipline to the undergraduate level. The Material Culture Team has begun sponsoring various cadet projects that use material culture as a methodology. For example, Maj. Jared D. Wigton has each cadet enrolled in his *History of the Military Art from 1904 to 2013* class give a presentation on an object of their choosing over the semester. The only stipulation is that the object must help explain the course reading of the day. The objects chosen by cadets have been as creative as they have been effective in fostering learning for their class.

During a lesson on World War I, Cadet Scott T. Donnellon played a French antiwar song, "La Chanson de Craonne," for his class. This song followed the French mutinies of 1917 and conveys the disillusionment that years on the front lines had created among the rank and file. Cadet Donnellon used this recording to explain not only why French soldiers on the Western Front refused to go "over the top" during the failed Nivelle Offensive, but also why the French memory of the 1917 mutinies remained controversial for decades after the war. With a single piece, Cadet Donnellon opened a whole national culture to his peers. This is just one instance that demonstrates how adeptly cadets

latch onto the idea of material culture and employ it in their studies.

The Material Culture Team is working with the West Point Museum and course directors to develop packages for the core history course the Department offers. In previous years, only *The History of the Military Art* had prebuilt packages each semester. These packages facilitated knowledge among the "Mil Art" teaching team. Junior instructors unfamiliar with a weapon or other artifact could watch senior faculty use the item, then employ the object in their class. By developing packages for core courses in American and International History, the Material Culture Team meets a broader demand from instructors to foster the same collaboration centered around objects. We have expanded our portfolio of typical items to include artwork, posters, maps, flags, clothing, uniforms, cooking and eating utensils, everyday items, and other pieces from the West Point Museum's 27,000-item collection. These have enabled cadets in all core history courses to establish a sensory connection with the past.

Sustaining this excitement among instructors and cadets is a challenging task for the Material Culture Team, especially with the high level of turnover among junior instructors who return to the operational Army after two to three years at West Point. To continue the momentum of this initiative, the team is constructing an online repository of material culture knowledge. This repository will allow instructors to access not only the history of the items they use, but also the ways in which previous instructors have used them to support lesson objectives.

The website will also provide an opportunity for faculty to publish brief articles that will contribute to the broader conversation in higher education of how to implement material culture in the classroom.⁸

Finally, the Material Culture Team is developing partnerships with organizations across West Point to expand the types of material culture available to instructors. Notably, the West Point Band is taking on a growing role in the history classroom. Members of the band provided a brief concert for cadets enrolled in Maj. Benjamin R. Flores' *History of Modern America* course. This concert covered major periods in American music, allowing cadets to hear the evolution of sound from the Jazz Age to the Rock Age. Maj. Alexander M. Humes asked band members to play the music used to direct troop movements on the Civil War battlefield for his sections of *Civil War America*. The music conveyed to the cadets how difficult command and control could be when a unit was under fire.

DISTINCTIVE MATERIAL CULTURE

Prown writes that "by undertaking cultural interpretation through artifacts, we can engage the other culture in the first instance not with our minds, the seat of our cultural biases, but with our senses." He continues, "the fact is that cultural perspective is only a problem or liability to the extent that one is unaware or unable to adjust for it."⁹ By making cadets' cultural perspective visible to them, material culture effectively aids the development

Cadets interact with weapons from the West Point Museum. U.S. Military Academy



of greater self-awareness and humility. Both these qualities are essential for becoming empathetic leaders. As faculty members in the Department of History at West Point, we believe that our discipline, and the courses we teach, play a critical role in helping cadets gain the empathy, respect, and humility necessary to forge inclusive teams in a multicultural Army. We approach diversity and inclusion from a variety of avenues, one of which is our use of material culture. The West Point Material Culture Team believes that the introduction of artifacts to cadet instruction develops leaders of character who can process and understand a complex past, and thus better negotiate a complex future as Army officers.

The most surprising aspect of developing material culture for use at West Point has been our rediscovery of West Point itself. Material culture has helped us understand why our storied institution holds such a unique place in the American psyche. From Trophy Point to the Long Gray Line, and from Kościuszko's Statue to the Cadet Mess Hall, West Point is an enduring place in the collective historical imagination of our nation. Through its distinctive material culture and its history of providing educated leaders of character to the Army in peace and war, we hope that our program can offer support and encouragement to other institutions for developing leaders of character.



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NOTES

1. George Rollie Adams, *General William S. Harney: Prince of Dragoons* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2001), pp. 102–03.

2. Jules David Prown, "Mind in Matter: An Introduction to Material Culture Theory and Method," *Winterthur Portfolio* 17, no. 1 (Spring 1982): 1.

3. At Bard College, Ivan Gaskell's *Focus Project—Gallery as Classroom* "aims to produce faculty and students who are adept in both museum and academic modes of scholarly investigation"; see the project website at <https://www.bgc.bard.edu/research-forum/projects/5/focus-project-gallery-as-classroom>. At Harvard, Laurel Thatcher Ulrich's *Tangible Things: Making History through Objects* explores how "the mobilization of material

things can enhance any comprehensive historical inquiry"; see Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, Ivan Gaskell, Sara J. Schechner, Sarah Anne Carter, and Samantha S. B. van Gerbig, *Tangible Things: Making History through Objects* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), p. 3.

4. See "Cadet Fine Arts Forum of the United States Corps of Cadets," in *Robert Weir, Artist and Teacher of West Point* (West Point, N.Y.: Cadet Fine Arts Forum of the United States Corps of Cadets, 1976), p. 20. See also Richard Coke Smyth, *Sketches in the Canadas* (London: T. McLean, 1839). Many thanks to Marlana Cook, the Curator of Art at the West Point Museum, for her assistance in tracking down the history of this painting and giving insight into the practice of art at West Point in the nineteenth century.

5. *Official Register of the Officers and Cadets of the U.S. Military Academy, West Point, New-York, June 1842* (New York: J. P. Wright, 1842), p. 9.

6. Samuel J. Watson, "The U.S. Army to 1900," in *A Companion to American Military History*, ed. James C. Bradford, vol. 1 (Chichester, UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), p. 339.

7. James Kirby Martin and Mark Edward Lender, "A Respectable Army": *The Military Origins of the Republic, 1763–1789*, 3d ed., American History Series (Chichester, UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2015), pp. xi–xii.

8. Material Culture Studies at West Point, United States Military Academy: West Point, n.d., <https://www.westpoint.edu/academics/academic-departments/history/material-culture>.

9. Prown, "Mind in Matter," p. 5.

