***Objects of Exchange: Social and Material Transformation on the Late Nineteenth-Century Northwest Coast*. Bard Graduate Center. January 26 through April 17, 2011.**[*]

Reviewed by Alexander Brier Marr

During the spring semester of 2011, 37 objects migrated from the American Museum of Natural History a few blocks north on Central Park West in New York City. Taking residence in the smaller and less conspicuous galleries of the Bard Graduate Center, the carvings, weavings, photographs, and other stuff of Northwest Coast indigenous cultures gave rise to a significant reappraisal of the familiar "museum age" of anthropology (roughly 1870-1930). *Objects of Exchange* served to open the Focus Gallery, a new one-room exhibition space on the ground floor of the former townhouse now occupied by Bard. Aaron Glass, assistant professor of anthropology at the Bard Graduate Center, curated the exhibit with the help of graduate students enrolled in Glass's practicum. The Focus Gallery opens up a discursive and exhibitionary space between art history and anthropology, scholarship and curatorial work.

The Focus Gallery is small. *Objects of Exchange* was dense with objects, curatorial writing, photographs, and, with the help of programmed iPods, the voices of living indigenous artists describing various display items. A paragraph of writing accompanied each object or photograph, often describing the iconography, material, and provenance of the object, and its formal resonances in historical visual culture. One exhibit text described how decorated wings of a carved wooden figure bear traces of both Christian and Haida painting styles. Drawings that Charles Edenshaw executed on stationary bearing the imprint of the American Museum of Natural History hang next to the jacket of Franz Boas's *Primitive Art*, which is decorated with a reproduction of Edenshaw's drawing. Undermining the perception that formline art exists outside of time and apart from individual artists, this display showed how many cross-cultural collaborations engendered the invention of "classical" Northwest Coast style.

Exhibitions of Native Northwest Coast material culture typically display objects from a single culture group, things of the same type, or "greatest hits" of well-known and oft-reproduced material. Highlighting the limits of these approaches, *Objects of Exchange* instead displayed hybrid or "boundary objects," as Glass calls them, things that defy straightforward classification. What united the work in *Objects of Exchange*, then, was a history of having been overlooked, of not belonging to categories established by anthropologists and art historians. The exchange these objects enable, as was made clear in careful textual framing and in the look of the things themselves, is the selective transfer of material goods, economic realities, and perceptions of otherness between settler and Native populations in Alaska and British Columbia. At its boldest, the exhibit radically rethought the narrative of cultural decline at the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th centuries.

One of the most enduring paradoxes of the "museum age" is that supposedly authentic examples of Native material culture were produced at the very time that Native cultures were perceived to

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be collapsing. According to erstwhile cultural taxonomies established by anthropologists and art historians, the objects on display would be impure—not properly representative of Native cultures as they existed before contact. The makers of many objects, including the anonymous creator of a dance apron that incorporates a flour sack printed with an English language real estate advertisement, appropriated material from settler society. The exhibit asked: which objects have been omitted from canons and master narratives? And it asked how attending to these material blind spots might affect classic ethnographic and art historical views of Native Northwest Coast culture during the decades flanking the turn of the 20th century. Still conscious of the split between art history and anthropology, though no longer mired in it, *Objects of Exchange* demonstrated that scholars can write histories of contact and exchange that begin with the relationality of objects. If in the past museums and universities helped establish the criteria for measuring authenticity and primitivism then such institutions today actively dismantle those categories.

Examining hybrid or "boundary" objects can help reveal the limits of ethnographic or art historical approaches to Native material culture. But more than rehashing well-worn critiques of rigid disciplinary study, *Objects of Exchange* seized on the productive capacities of hybrid material. Giving credence to the conceit that things, like people, have social lives, the exhibit traced the intersecting trajectories of its objects. Borrowing from internet culture, Glass (and the graduate students who assisted with exhibit planning and research) tagged each object with a few keywords—transformation, models, Christianity, souvenir, Indigenized, to name a few. A computer screen in the gallery showed an interactive tag cloud, which was also available on the exhibition website. Viewers could click on either a word or object. The cloud then visualized all the relations therein. What emerged was an infinite set of loose associations between objects, ideas, institutions, and people. Using the cloud, viewers cooked up their own stories about the ways that objects engendered cultural exchange. While the textual contributions of *Objects of Exchange* tied the material to detailed histories and broadly reconsidered the master narratives of acculturation and collecting, at times the scope of this curatorial intervention overwhelms the few and small objects on display. The tag cloud, then, allowed viewers the latitude to approach the exhibit on their own terms. By examining how "boundary objects" choreographed cultural change and exchange, rather than focusing on a specific type of item or a certain group, *Objects of Exchange* told visitors as much about the present state of scholarship on historical Native North American visual culture as it did about the history of its objects presented.

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