

The Social Life of Materials: Studies in Material and Society.* Adam Drazin and Susanne Kücher, eds. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015. 336 pp.

Reviewed by Rowland Ricketts

To dye cloth with indigo was historically a process that required a complex understanding of and engagement with one's immediate environment. The dyer had to be able to identify or cultivate an indigo-bearing plant and know how to extract or concentrate the color in its leaves. She had to create an alkaline solution from materials at hand for fermenting the dye in a living dye vat that required care and attention over time. In all its different states—plant, dyestuff, dye vat, and final color—indigo exerted its agency as a material and forced an interaction that demanded certain actions from the dyer for success. Learning from the dye, these actions accumulated into an embodied knowledge that, passed from generation to generation, formed community and an understanding of the “materials world” (4) we inhabited as one not so different from ourselves.

Today, a quick google search leads to dozens of readily available pre-reduced indigo kits for the DIY dyer. “Just add water!” they exclaim. No experience necessary. The distinction between historical indigo knowledge and contemporary instant dye kits exemplifies the idea of “materials-by-design” (275) as put forth in *The Social Life of Materials: Studies in Material and Society*. Reduced to its basic chemistry, the dye kit becomes a “convergent” design material concerned “with the ‘experience’ of people who use and work with designed products and services” (xx). In designing the instant dye kits “the application or requirements often come first” (in this case the needs of a DIY dyer who has no idea how to work with indigo) “and the material is then concocted to meet those needs” (275). In meeting these needs, and as measured by their proliferation, the kits are as a huge success.

But how do they function beyond merely coloring cloth? Certainly the knowledge required to synthesize the chemicals necessary for instant indigo dye kits is deep, but it happens at a great remove from our individual experience. Although the resulting color is identical in both methods, the sense of connection to one's environment through the plants, to community through the transmission and stewardship of knowledge, and to experiential learning through the dye's agency have been discounted in our move to an era in which “science and design have triumphed in giving texture to the dream of escaping the shackles of nature, by creating an artificial one in their own image” (277).

The Social Life of Materials reveals the potential of evaluating materials from an anthropological perspective—one that embraces the shifting understanding of a material based on its context. Collectively, the works in the volume argue that only when doing so does a larger picture begin to emerge of what is being lost in the narrow quantitative evaluation of a material science, design, or philosophical approach to materials.

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Important questions are asked and examined across the book's four main divisions: how do materials come into being? How are they given form? How are perceptions of an object transformed by our contextual understanding of its constituent material? How do materials gain meaning through their lived social contexts? The concluding chapter by the book's co-editor, Susanne Küchler, powerfully pulls together the individual contributors' answers to these questions into a near manifesto that proclaims the urgency of examining materials from a broader perspective in order to challenge the academically, politically, and economically dominant approaches of the material sciences and design.

Arguing convincingly for anthropology's relevance in defining and understanding the "materials world" we inhabit, *The Social Life of Materials* also establishes a framework for an even broader discussion. In order to focus the volume, perspectives from archaeology, art, and craft were intentionally excluded—a wise decision given their potential expansiveness. Still, to me, as a studio artist and art educator, materials are everything. Through their specificity materials reveal inherent immaterial associations—how and where did they come to be, by what systems did they end up in our societies and studios—raising important questions about ourselves and our society. Through their malleability or often immutability, materials give or push back against us, forging relationships and tracing unforeseen connections and new understandings. I hope that this book is not an anomaly but rather the beginning of a deeper, multi-disciplinary examination of materials. There is clearly still a lot to learn.

Rowland Ricketts utilizes natural dyes and historical processes to create contemporary textiles that span art and design. Trained in indigo farming and dyeing in Japan, Ricketts received his MFA from Cranbrook Academy of Art in 2005 and is currently an Associate Professor of Studio Art at Indiana University. His work has been exhibited at the Textile Museum (Washington, DC), the Museum of Fine Arts Boston, the Museum of Contemporary Craft, and the Seattle Asian Art Museum. Rowland is a recipient of a 2012 United States Artists Fellowship and a 2014 Martha Stewart American Made Award.

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