Spinning Old Yarn into New Tales

Between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries, a number of commodities circulated in and around the Atlantic. Today, they can tell us about the significance of material objects in the production and transmission of social, cultural, and personal meanings. Indeed, an empowering result to come from the investiture in certain material objects can be the definition of self and the creation of community. One could go so far as to associate one’s national cultural identity with such an object. Consider the spinning wheel. Among the many ideologically significant objects circulating in both local and international spheres, it came to tell essential stories about globalization and nation building.

To examine the commodified life of an object or prized personal possession also warrants a discussion – or, at the very least, an acknowledgment – of the ideologies of both gender and fashion for while the experience of women was very different from that which was experienced by men, women and men took a role in fashioning their own social identities. In the eighteenth century, an increased interest in clothing and manners emerged concurrently with issues and notions of “taste” – or what by the mid-eighteenth century became a new scholarly discourse known as “aesthetics” – and cloth was a major British import. Regarding this cloth, “the bright stripes and colourful prints, especially the lighter weight textiles, were quickly transformed into garments. Indeed, dress was the

1 While Carson develops a byzantine argument behind consumer demand in the eighteenth century, recognition of the active participation of women is lacking.

2 With regard to taste, Richard Bushman, in his book, *The Refinement of America: Persons, Houses, Cities*, describes how taste was honored as a virtue and therefore appropriated by the gentlemen of the eighteenth century as a way to distinguish themselves from common men.
most sensitive index to fashion.”

3 This is an important point with broad and international ramifications because already there were increasing anxieties over the failure of clothing to act as an indicator of class and social respectability. As consumer markets (and by extension, industrial production) expanded, which included the international cloth and garment industry, high fashion clothing and materials (e.g., certain Chinese silks, Indian cottons) also became more widely available to those who could afford them. One’s dress could now disguise rather than reveal rank – a fact that “nearly drove” one member of the clergy “to distraction.”

4 And while the Early American historian T.H. Breen observed that “young people of Boston… challenged the social and moral conventions” and that many consumers were purchasing yards and “yards of brightly coloured cloth”, it was, however, the woman consumer who colonial writers “blamed… for consumer excess.”

While Chinese tea was a major import into colonial North America, there were plenty of other goods coming into American ports as well, the number of which, from whence they came, the specifics of monies owed, is the often the focus of scholarly attention to the trade and burgeoning consumerism of eighteenth-century colonial America. But from (or for) a material culture perspective, these analyses say little about “the cultural effects” on the people – the merchants and their workers and the folks who came to buy – such as “the processes of… loading, unloading, buying, selling, and accounting for vast quantities of goods, from piles of [wood and] …barrels of molasses to

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3 Brewer, 255.

4 Breen’s example is the Reverend Jonathan Mayhew, who went so far as to refer to the holy scriptures as a means of providing instruction for a sanctioned social order whereby “‘distinctions of dress’” are accorded to “‘the differences in [the] stations and circumstances in life.’” See Breen in Brewer, 255.
pints of rum… chests of tea… [and] porcelain cups.”

It should not be surprising, then, “that the leading figures of this society responded by developing a culture that emphasized the value of material objects in defining self and creating community.”

Spinning fibers into yarn and thread is a process that has been in existence for thousands of years, although historians have not been able to determine the time and place where hand spindles were first used. Some of the earliest illustrations of spinning wheels appear in the thirteenth century and come from Iran and China, and there is evidence that they were already in use as of the eleventh century, but the spinning wheel itself, the tool most commonly associated with the act of spinning, did not appear in Europe until the late Middle Ages and was probably introduced to the British Isles from Holland in the fourteenth century. The spindle and spinning thus became part of the mythology and folklore of many cultures. For example, in the Republic, Plato compares the axis of the universe to the shaft of a spindle and the heavens as a whorl, and there are references in the Bible to spindles and spinning. In Navaho culture, there is the goddess Spider Woman, who teaches the art of spinning, while in Greek mythology a boastful Arachne challenges the goddess Athena to a spinning and weaving contest, which Arachne loses, and is turned into a spider. And in fairy tales such as “Sleeping Beauty” and “Rumplestilskin,” the lives of main characters are forever bound up with spinning and/or the spinning wheel.

It has been over thirty years since Christopher Monkhouse published the essay, “The Spinning Wheel as Artifact, Symbol, and Source of Design.” In it, he identified the

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5 Hunter, 4.

6 Ibid.
spinning wheel as “an immediately recognizable relic of a bygone (i.e., preindustrial) era” and added that it was the nineteenth-century poet Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, who, in his 1858 poem, “The Courtship of Miles Standish,” “not only succeeded in rescuing the wheel from years of neglect, but also transformed the spinning wheel from a symbol of female bondage into a relic shrouded in romance.” Not too long after, in the early 1890s, it was suggested that a spinning wheel become a symbol for the Daughters of the American Revolution. Sure enough, in a textile made by Anderson Brothers of Paterson, New Jersey circa 1890, Betsy Ross is sitting next to a spinning wheel while working on the American flag. As Monkhouse saw it, the association “places the spinning wheel on a par with the stars and stripes.” But therein lies the rub: does the implication of symbolic parity deny the spinning wheel the opportunity to be viewed in any other context? Is the spinning wheel such a relic? Is one’s national cultural identity or femaleness so easily associated with such an object?

We are fortunate that “the diversity of material worlds” allows for each to become the “other’s contexts,” thereby enabling this reexamination of the spinning wheel and its relationship to rural and Colonial America as well as national cultural identity and its role in women’s history. For example, Christmas in Connecticut, released in July 1945, is a story about a single magazine writer, Elizabeth Lane, who is forced to pose as a fictional married housewife from Connecticut and entertain a soldier recently recovered from wounded received while fighting in the Atlantic during World War II. In reality, Elizabeth does not cook or maintain a home other than her one room apartment in New

7 Ibid., 168.

York city, but she has made a good career for herself as a famous food writer and domestic goddess, regaling readers with vivid descriptions of the homey pleasures of cooking, housekeeping, and, especially, decorating the home for the Christmas holidays. In fact, she has been so successful in conjuring up and painting mental pictures of traditional notions of home, family, and holiday celebrations that a sympathetic nurse at the hospital where the wounded soldier spent his recovery contacts the magazine, and before anyone can say, “How do you boil water,” it is arranged that the soldier will spend Christmas in Connecticut with “Mrs.” Lane and her family “in a ‘real’ American home.”

As planned, the soldier arrives on Christmas Eve, accompanied by Elizabeth’s boss and owner of the magazine, Mr. Yardley, who, after surveying the interior, remarks: “I’ve been admiring your charming room… but where is the spinning wheel?”

For Mr. Yardley, the spinning wheel ideologically completed the picture of the domestic idyll – one where a woman performing homey tasks was the personification of beauty in the home and, through the beautification of her domestic space, “‘to her home passes the charm that was once thrown around her person’…. Selection and arrangement of possessions personified the nature of the woman who served as ‘priestess and minister of a family state,’ and interiors became material equivalents of the moral state of the household.”

The romance of the relic perseveres. Writing on the home of the

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10 Peter Godfrey, dir., Christmas in Connecticut (Hollywood, Ca., Warner Bros., 1945). Barbara Stanwyck, as Elizabeth Lane, quickly explains that the spinning wheel “[is] out for repair.”

American family between 1750 and 1870, Elisabeth Garrett had this to say: “Although these tasks were time-consuming, they were less onerous than others and allowed the housewife an opportunity to daydream or converse while working. On long summer afternoons, one might have passed the back doors of house after house and seen the womenfolk enjoying the air… and the chatter while drawing out plaint threads from their wheels.”

A colleague of mine recently said she was dating a forty-something year old who, in his small New York city apartment, displayed a spinning wheel. When asked why, he said that it was an investment in the current fashion for nineteenth-century Americana. (Perhaps the biggest boon to this latest revival is, somewhat ironically, the Internet and the proliferation of websites on spinning and/or the spinning wheel.) The re-appearance of the spinning wheel as interior *accouterment* can be linked to the Colonial Revival, which “had its debut at the Philadelphia Centennial Exposition in 1876, amid the salute to American technological progress.”

Christopher Monkhouse attributed the revival of the spinning wheel to the mid-nineteenth century bicentennials of colonial-era towns that often incorporated historical displays and reenactments. Whether for assumed historical accuracy or foil for technology, the spinning wheel was now out of the closet – and the attic and the shed.

The nineteenth century was a time of great and rapid transformation in America. With industrialization came factories and mass production, whereby the factory, not the

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13 Schlereth, 1982, 293.
individual, dominated the making of goods for the consumer. Along with mass consumption came increasing urbanization – either because urban living “offered comparatively high wages and freedom or because some laborers could not sustain themselves in the rural economy.” And the role of women continued to be shaped and reshaped by these external forces of socio-economic change. More and more women were working outside the home and often out of financial necessity. Typically, many found employment as unskilled workers in the new factories and mills or in domestic service – the latter employment option reflecting the reapplication of the word “domestic”: that being domestic was not the same things as being employed as a domestic or household servant.

Introduced into this already changing socio-economic climate was a geo-political element. Americans, their nation in its infancy relative to their counterparts in Europe, began to attach “special significance to the character of their land space, and special characteristics to persons from other geographic areas.” This led to the formation and codification of a national cultural identity based on an imagined and romanticized colonial past and was subsequently made manifest in the choice of subjects with which to

14 Grier, 5.

15 The number of working women significantly increased after the Civil War. Although many of these women were unmarried, many were also widowed and young married women.


surround and identify oneself. It had become imperative to preserve that past, and thus the colonial revival was born.

An early manifestation of this preservation/revival movement is generally thought to be in 1850 when the effort was made to preserve George Washington’s headquarters along the Hudson River in Newburgh, New York. The revival style became increasingly widespread and popular; by the 1876 Centennial Exhibition in Philadelphia, middle-class Americans were in the throes of their “love affair with the colonial and Revolutionary past” – the enduring pervasiveness of the latter exemplified by the spinning wheel chairs made in the 1880s and into the early 1900s.\(^\text{18}\) Although spinning wheels had languished relatively out of sight since machine manufacturing rendered them outdated and inefficient, they now assumed the stature of “prized antiques [for display] by the fireplace” and had become popular to the point that collectors literally took what they could get – even if that meant damaged or broken spinning wheels.\(^\text{19}\) The Boston chairmaker William B. Savage capitalized on this passion and devised an innovative form of seat furniture by recycling usable parts of broken spinning wheels, and, in turn, the “meaning” of both and spinning wheel was similarly recycled such that the “new” chair represented one man’s imaginative engagement with and interpretation of the “old” colonial past.\(^\text{20}\)

\(^{18}\) Ibid.

\(^{19}\) Christopher P. Monkhouse, *American Furniture in Pendleton House.* (Providence, 1986), 199.

\(^{20}\) Innovation and creativity notwithstanding, Monkhouse, in his discussion of the origination of the spinning wheel chair, allows for the possibility that the chair may simply reflect the formal inspiration of chair designs by New York contemporary, George Hunzinger. Just as spinning wheels are comprised of regularized and crisply turned parts, so, too, are the parts of Hunzinger’s patented folding chair. As an inventive craftsman, Hunzinger took advantage of the new machine-age technology of industrialization – in
On August 14, 1851, Litchfield, Connecticut was in the process of observing its county centennial. This act of remembrance was not marked by the outward demonstrations often typical of anniversarial celebrations such as the Fourth of July. There were no fireworks, no parades. There was, however, a lengthy solemn procession and several speeches carried out over two days. The speeches variously addressed the progress their town had made in terms of education and enterprise. Included in the eulogizing remarks of several august townsmen were references to “the hard-working colonial wives” whose “housekeeping talents were valued”; to the “exhausted colonial housewife sitting slumped beside her wheel, ‘a heap of cotton lying by her side’” who will be delivered from her labors by the nearly-divine intervention of the benefits of progress.21 Although the role (and work) of women was thus duly acknowledged, the real thrust of the day’s speeches was about the role of men, which served to perpetuate the preferred, mythic version of the town’s history and the role of women and women’s work in that history. It was not until the second day of speeches when the Reverend Horace Bushnell spoke, invoking a chapter from the bible where a “virtuous woman…‘layeth her hands to the spindle,’” that a new vision of Litchfield was proposed, “challenging conventional notions of history.”22 As Laurel Thatcher Ulrich observed, the particular, the lathe – and used it “to create… decorative effects for his furniture,” thereby turning the machine into “a source of aesthetic inspiration.” See Barry R. Harwood, The Furniture of George Hunzinger: Invention and Innovation in Nineteenth-Century America (Brooklyn, NY: The Brooklyn Museum of Art, 1997), 46.


22 Ibid., 14-15.
second day of the centennial events taking place in Litchfield would be the christening
day for the age of homespun.\textsuperscript{23}

For Bushnell, the true founders of Litchfield were anonymous: “‘who they are by
name we cannot tell…. Enough that they are the King Lemuels and Queens of
Homespun.’”\textsuperscript{24} In many ways, Bushnell’s vision of Litchfield’s past was not that
different from the idealized versions presented the day before. Yet, what made him and
his words so galvanizing was that there was an immediacy, a seemingly tangible
physicality. For example, Ulrich described the scene of Bushnell’s speech as one where
the “audience could hear the ‘thwack’ of the weaver ‘beating the woof’ and the feel of the
rough wool on the body.”\textsuperscript{25} Moreover, Bushnell’s version of history literally became
“herstory”: supporting the argument for culture rather than for “event,” Bushnell
repositioned women “in the center of the story” and lauded “the character-building
virtues of rural life and the importance of women’s work in the domestic setting.”\textsuperscript{26} But
as initially heartening to revisionist and feminist historians as this seemingly egalitarian
position may appear, there is a tension implicit in Bushnell’s argument which, although
less conducive to a woman-centered rewriting of history, does help explain the attraction
to the age of homespun – and with it, the glorified objectness of the spinning wheel – and

\textsuperscript{23} Ibid., 12.

\textsuperscript{24} Ibid., 15.

\textsuperscript{25} Ibid., 16.

\textsuperscript{26} Ibid., 18.
the entrenchment of woman’s role in the domestic environment. The tension for Bushnell was that, although he recognized the oppression of women and agreed with and argued for a woman’s right to equal education, he “simply could not imagine a society in which women took on the ‘rough-hewing’ work of government.” Perhaps this ambivalence is the reason Ann Douglas finds much of what Bushnell had to say problematic; that his speech at the Litchfield centennial “was less a tribute to current progress than to a lament for the ‘Puritan Arcadia’ of the past.”

Figuring significantly in this discussion are Bushnell’s words on the transformation of the socio-economic role of the New England woman – “the ‘frugal, faithful, pious housewife’ spinning the clothes and linen of her family” – and the nature and power of history for we see in the centennial and bicentennial celebrations of the nineteenth century exhibitions with content relative to women’s domestic production.

27 Ironically, part of Bushnell’s thinking was grounded in a preindustrial world where the economy and household were one. In this way, ideologues did not need to quibble over equality and domesticity, and enlightened contemporary writers could exalt the work of women without jeopardizing the existing, comfortable notion of separate but complementary spheres of work. In other words, women remained in their place but felt better about it. Also, just as the interest in folklore and folk culture contributed to the colonial revival, the revival of a colonial past included the reality of the existence of indigenous people to whom the only allusion in Bushnell’s speech, as pointed out by Ulrich, was early on and not much more than a sentence. According to Ulrich, Bushnell “created an American pastoral by leaving Indians out, ignoring both the devastating wars of the colonial period and the persistence of native peoples.” (Ulrich, 24.)

28 Ibid., 23.


30 Ibid., 52.
In essence, these early exhibitions form the mainstay of the colonial revival and underscore the “concern for the traditional American symbols” as identified by Lizabeth Cohen.\(^{31}\)

As for when, exactly, the first spinning wheel appeared in a public New England celebration is not known. Laurel Thatcher Ulrich suggested that the idea to do so might have originated with “Whig politicking” in New Hampshire in 1840.\(^{32}\) As part of the Fourth of July celebration in Rockport, Massachusetts in 1854, a parade float was included that consisted of ten young women sitting at spinning wheels.\(^{33}\) By the 1860s, an emotionally scarred public reeling from the horrors of the Civil War found an idealized past even more attractive. Accordingly, Christopher Monkhouse noted that “historical displays” had become “a welcome and popular form of diversion” at sanitary fairs.\(^{34}\) The largest of these fairs was the Brooklyn and Long Island Sanitary Fair of 1864.

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31 Schlereth, 1982, 293.

32 Ulrich, 25.

33 In addition to spinning wheel displays, mini histories of cloth-making, along with representative examples, were soon included into celebratory exhibitions, as were displays of “primitive” crafts such as Native American basket-weaving, pottery, and textiles – examples of which would be featured as a special exhibition at the Chicago World’s Fair in 1893.

34 Ames, 1983, 157. Sanitary fairs were the idea of two women – Mary Livermore and Jane Hoge – from the Chicago headquarters of the U.S. Sanitary Commission, a volunteer organization committed to raising donations for medical supplies for troops and wounded soldiers in the Civil War. Livermore and Hoge suggested organizing a fair as a fund-raising event when donations were so low that the Sanitary Commission considered closing down the volunteer arm of the commission. On October 27, 1863, the Chicago World’s Fair opened, and for two weeks 5,000 people paid seventy-five cents a day for admission to view exhibits and be served a meal by prominent women from the community. The exhibits ranged from Confederate flags to machinery to farm equipment. There were also donations of pianos, toys, food, clothes, furniture, and
where “women set up the refreshment room to resemble a Colonial New England kitchen, complete with antique chairs.”

Writing on the home of the American family between 1750 and 1870, Elisabeth Garrett revealed the romance of the relic: “Although these tasks were time-consuming, they were less onerous than others and allowed the housewife an opportunity to daydream or converse while working. On long summer afternoons, one might have passed the back doors of house after house and seen the womenfolk enjoying the air… and the chatter while drawing out plaint threads from their wheels.” Indeed, a colleague of mine recently claimed to be dating a forty-something year old who, in his small New York city apartment, displayed a spinning wheel. When asked why, he said that it was an investment in the current fashion for nineteenth-century Americana.

Artwork, as well as an original draft of the Emancipation Proclamation donated by President Lincoln. The draft was sold at auction for $3,000. When the fair closed, the commission had raised nearly $100,000.

35 Ibid.


37 Perhaps the biggest boon to this latest revival is the Internet and the proliferation of websites on spinning and/or the spinning wheel. A sampling of sites includes “The Spinning Wheel Sleuth,” dedicated to the collection and exchange of information about spinning wheels so as to make that information more accessible before the wheels and the materials about them are completely gone; “The Woolery,” a site for spinning and weaving supplies; “SpindleWorks,” a cryptic site for Sharing Reformed Christian Resources Around the World; and “New York Carver,” which is passionately devoted to
stone carving, architecture, art, and all things having to do with the Middle Ages, including the “invention” of the spinning wheel.