Reflection on Material Culture

by Matt Moeller

One of the requirements to the survival of a culture is that the expectations and requirements that the culture imposes upon its participants be passed from generation to generation. The process by which people learn the rules and behaviors that are appropriate within their culture is referred to as enculturation. This education is achieved in many different ways on many different levels; participants are constantly engaged by both material and nonmaterial culture on micro, middle, and macro levels. Through these engagements people become participants within the societies in which they live and eventually go on to both knowingly and unknowingly pass these expectations on to future generations. In thinking on my own experiences of enculturation during my childhood, I was reminded of my father.

From a very early age, I have memories of my father’s watch. It was a gold Seiko with a blue face and linked band. As a small boy, I would often ask to wear it. The watch would dangle off my wrist like a pair of old sneakers tied together by the laces then tossed over a telephone line -- I remember marveling at how much larger my father’s wrist must be in comparison to my own. I understood that in time I, too, would one day be a big man with a big wrist and one of the associations I placed upon manhood was that “real” men wore big, heavy metal watches and that the responsibility of being on time was important. Other men I encountered were then judged on the merit represented by their own timepieces; those exhibiting a style similar to my father’s earned my respect whereas someone not wearing a watch, or even worse, wearing one I deemed “childlike” such as a digital or calculator watch, were met with a certain level of contempt. Undoubtedly, my parents taught me how to tell
time, but they certainly never trained me to judge people by their material possessions, yet somehow this belief developed, anyhow.

In thinking on this example of my own enculturation, I am struck by the different levels of interaction within the process. While not explicitly instructed to do so, I began making assumptions about people based on their material possessions. I also learned about the relationship between time and the society in which father lived, and to be a contributing member of that society myself, I must also adhere to this concept. Like many assumptions that I made as a child, judging a man by the watch on his wrist seems silly now. Yet I can’t deny that I still from time to time glance down to see how someone else’s compares to my own... And if nothing else, at least I can tell time, one function of culture I’m sure my parents were proud to pass along.

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