

# AIMA Newsletter N°9 December 2016

## ▣ Special Issue ▣

### Material Culture, Intangibles and Authenticity, Scholars and Collections



Courtesy Claudia Kinmonth



Courtesy Jacques Holtz

## AIMA Newsletter N°9 December 2016

- ❖ Be sure to **visit the AIMA website** at <http://agriculturalmuseums.org/> for more information and frequent updates on subjects concerning museums of agriculture
- ❖ ... and send this **Newsletter** on to your friends to encourage them to join us in the AIMA, in its workshops, for advice, and at the CIMA 18 Congress in Estonia in 2017!



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## **CIMA 18 in Estonia / 9-13 May 2017 Traditions and Change – Sustainable Futures**



Estonian symbols:  
cornflower, swallow, flag

AIMA's 2017 triennial congress CIMA XVIII **Traditions and Change — Sustainable Futures** webpage is now open at <http://cima2017.eu/welcome/> with the call for papers and registration.

Please sign up and spread the word amongst your colleagues and partners, especially regarding contributors to workshops or plenary. The deadline for abstract submission is **15 February 2017**. Early bird registration until **28 February 2017**. There are enriching **visits** scheduled on the programme, as well as a **post-congress tour** (14-16 May in addition to the congress events).

AIMA's next triennial congress CIMA XVIII takes place in 2017 in Estonia. The purpose of AIMA is to educate the public about the significance of agriculture to human society, to explain the many ways that agriculture has evolved through time, and to facilitate dialogue between museums across the globe about agricultural topics and discoveries. Today, museums face a momentous task of keeping up with changes while keeping alive the invaluable past. Therefore in 2017, we focus on how traditions and rural heritage can be used to create changes for sustainable futures.

Agricultural Museums take many forms – they operate as research institutions, as places of civic dialogue, and as repositories of tangible and intangible cultural heritage. Their collections grew during periods when rapid outmigration from rural and farm settings prompted public memorialisation of rural and farm experiences.

CIMA XVIII calls on agricultural and rural life museums and other stakeholders all over the world to seek answers to the following questions:

1. How can rural heritage be used to ensure global food safety?
2. Should modern museums expand missions to incorporate the current social reactions to agricultural controversies (such as GMOs, government regulation, use of chemical inputs and environmental effects)?
3. How do modern agricultural museums collect, preserve, and interpret social changes that have influenced/are influencing agriculture and rural life?
4. How do your museum's collections, exhibitions and activities introduce historical memory and practices?
5. How does your museum influence public opinion about agriculture (past, present, and future)?
6. How has your institution harnessed external partnerships to encourage discovery beyond the traditional, agriculture museum experience?
7. What pressures from outside of your museum affect your daily operations or ability to plan in the long term? What strategies do you implement for proactive planning?
8. How do current issues affect your research, exhibition, and public programming goals?

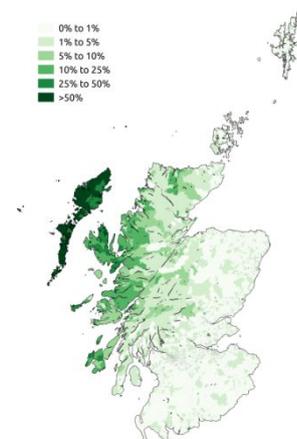
We hope to find some answers through shared experiences and knowledge at CIMA XVIII. The CIMA XVIII Academic Committee <http://cima2017.eu/overview/>



## Whither Material Culture? by Hugh Cheape

*AIMA Executive Committee members who attended the May 2012 emergency meeting at the Museum of Scottish Country Life in Kitchside met **Hugh Cheape, Senior Lecturer in the University of the Highlands and Islands**, who teaches in Scottish Gaelic. For anyone unfamiliar with the minority language situation in the British Isles, the Gaelics of Ireland, Scotland and the Isle of Man are related languages. The areas where native speakers are still an important section of the population are “designated” as ‘Gaeltacht’ in Ireland and as ‘Gàidhealtachd’ in Scotland. As in any country where there is language diversity, the study of material culture through the language of the people concerned is of*

*paramount importance. What would the “things” be, without the “words”, and the intangible culture that lends them meaning?*



Distribution of Gaelic speakers 2001 census  
Wikipedia Commons, Javier G. Pereda

Material Culture studies in one form or another might be claimed to be omnipresent, having evolved through the emerging disciplines of the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, most obviously, for example, in archaeology, anthropology, ethnology, folk life and cultural studies and historical geography. This may still be an over-optimistic viewpoint since the historian's raw material in the academic discourse rarely confronts material culture *per se*. In the anglophone world at least, a shortcoming can be perceived in that the study of material culture is not yet susceptible to ready and discrete definition within the unity of a single discipline or within an institutional identity, and therefore may seem anomalous or adrift. Even the university degree courses that fly the banner of 'Ethnology' tend more towards literature and the oral tradition. For many of us, as 'practitioners', artefacts and the artefactual context are an unequivocally powerful means of conveying information and of prompting and sustaining communication. So how can we put this message to wider use in the world of teaching and learning and allow the shortcomings of 'material culture' to sharpen our own message, for example, in coping with the gaps in the record or dwindling expertise for encoding and interpreting the material record?

In spite of a 'material culture' expertise in disciplines such as archaeology and cultural anthropology, material culture studies should still when possible be firmly anchored in museum collections where the practitioners have been customarily trained to contextualise data together with context such as the made and built environment. Unambiguously, material culture has stood for the *modus operandi* of museums although it can be seen to have varied in its focus according to intellectual and political shifts and changes in museum practice over the last century and a half. Quintessentially, museums have provided a national locus and a domain whose premise is founded on the study of the object and its context. The AIMA has provided an international focus and a forum with its longstanding mix of museum professionals and academics. AIMA's re-launch and exercise of vast experience and competence is a manifest blessing in a world of changing horizons and *mores*.

Whereas there has been a marked material turn in university studies, and material culture studies continue to be courted and espoused in the world of academics, for example, in cultural anthropology and folk life studies, at the same time material culture studies have been receding in the UK world of museums. Time put to acquiring and recording artefacts has been shrinking and museums are now subject to new financial stringencies and political imperatives; the museum of the twenty-first century has the more utilitarian role of entertaining and informing, though nonetheless important, but it must signal its success in terms of footfall and visitor numbers. While the role of the curator has to be a more public and front-of-house one, sustaining the nexus between research and scholarship and museum collections could henceforth acquire a sharpened edge with training within the universities. Where universities have museums, this pathway may be adopted *sui generis*, but elsewhere the links and associations have to be nursed into being.

Sabhal Mòr Ostaig, the national centre for Gaelic language and culture and a constituent college of the University of the Highlands and Islands, has created a MSc programme under the title *Cultar Dùthchasach agus Eachdraidh na Gàidhealtachd* ('Material Culture & Gàidhealtachd History'). This markedly interdisciplinary taught-masters course, initiated in 2007 and re-validated in 2012, builds on an implicit link between a research training and material culture. Adopting a Gaelic approach to material culture studies, the course puts material culture centre-stage and adds language and literature to the disciplinary palette by teaching through the medium of Scottish Gaelic; this is in line with the purpose and mission of Sabhal Mòr Ostaig and is recognised as an essential element in language progression from

undergraduate to doctoral level and offering teaching at the highest levels and engagement with the language at the deepest levels.

Familiarity with museum collections and methodologies is used to explore new disciplinary fields and tranches of evidence. Asking questions of artefacts opens up ‘material’ references and further dimensions in philology and lexicography. This has hitherto not been done in Scotland where the dictionaries of Scottish Gaelic have been poor recorders of artefacts and material culture. We have not enjoyed such fruits of research as Professor Fergus Kelly’s analysis of the Early Irish Laws for their illumination of early agriculture (see *Early Irish farming: the evidence of the Law-texts*, Dublin 1997). Being taught entirely through the medium of Scottish Gaelic, it is evident that the language and focus, and consequently identity of the course, demands a different engagement with the scholarly material. Here in Scottish Gaelic we have a living language, a rich literature, poetry, song and vivid narration in oral transmission, a vehicle for acute learning and powerful piety, a distinctive environment, and deeply embedded traditions of working the land and sea. This is surely a dream territory for material culture studies and its neglect an opportunity now for rapid advance! It must be said too that values and copious sources such as these we are claiming for Scottish Gaelic are often difficult to discern in the sources that purport to give an account of Scottish history and culture, whether in the past or present - in other words, little effort has been made to come to terms with a general scholarly ignorance of the language in the circumstances of Gaelic in Scotland moving over centuries from being a dominant to a minority language.

Within the framework of the current MSc, interdisciplinary study through the medium of Gaelic draws on a blend of history, sociology, human geography, cultural anthropology and folk life studies, as well as taking full cognizance of material culture and its vocabulary, between landscape, the built environment and museum collections. The valorisation of MSc has evolved a more confident strain of interdisciplinary research into the material culture of the Scottish Gàidhealtachd and is drawing more fully on the complexities and nuances of the language and on indigenous perspectives. This is ideal material for master’s and higher level research since students in the Scottish studies arena can learn to challenge existing ideological and academic landscapes within the humanities and social sciences.



View from Quiraing to the Staffinbay. Isle of Skye, Scotland, 12-06-2011, Stefan Krause

Paradigms of cultural history have been shifting in our more conservative academies in recent decades and we are witnessing a material turn in methodology, as we have suggested. Focus on artefacts predominated in archaeology and in anthropology but now we are getting used to the study of things and their relationship to human history, the study of the made and ‘built’ world of the ‘cultural landscape’, the study of ‘materiality’ as insight into academic concepts of memory and identity, and the assembling of ‘cultural biographies’ of objects and

landscapes. The study of material culture in turn fits comfortably into the expansion of the historical discourse and the readiness of historians to venture over disciplinary boundaries and ponder the ‘meaning of things’. A star-burst comment was made by the strident historian of the Tudors and Stuarts, Dr David Starkey, when he curated the exhibition celebrating the tercentenary of the Society of Antiquaries in 2007: ‘History is the history of things’, marking surely the conversion of a ‘conventional’ academic historian to material culture studies!

With all this debate and intellectual muscle-flexing, there is a tendency to focus on ‘material culture’ theory and to shy away from substance. But if we adopt a Gaelic approach to material culture studies, what can we learn that we cannot learn elsewhere and what difference might this knowledge make? On the simplest level we immediately have another dimension for the big topics of Highland and Hebridean social and economic history opened up since Malcolm Gray’s *The Highland Economy 1750-1850* (1957), for example, food and diet, cultivation, animal husbandry and fishing, housing and how these responded to changing economic circumstances, and, drilling down into the evidence, how people made or obtained supplies and materials such as clothing, tools and the bare necessities of life as the region slipped into crisis. We seem to know very little about self-reliance and survival skills and how people coped with circumstances of relative plenty or famine and how these were experienced outside the literature of economic determinism, when the ‘Clearances’ and mass emigration became the order of the day. We read copiously about the kelp industry with the occasional reference to distinctions between *Laminaria* and *Fucus*, but with little awareness, perhaps, of ‘kelp’ as fertiliser and food source, how harvested, how cooked and eaten, how composted, how laid on the land and with what expectations, and the whole picture illuminated by a huge glossary in Scottish Gaelic which far outstrips Linnaean botanical classifications.



Left: New college buildings Sabhal Mor Ostaig, Skye, Scotland, Wikipedia Creative Commons, W.L. Tarbert 17-10-2007; Right: Wikipedia Creative Commons, Ewen Denney, 16-09-2002

To an extent the evidence is transmitted through oral tradition and survives in song and colloquial speech. Until more recently, Celtic Studies rarely engaged with *bàrdachd bhaile* or so-called ‘township poetry’ in which a wealth of evidence, particularly for material culture, is carried. A song from Arisaig of the early-nineteenth century, for example, gives a virtually unique view in his own words of how the Highland drover did business buying and selling cattle, showing *inter alia*, how people thought and communicated (see ‘Song on the good points of a Highland cow’, in *ROSC – Review of Scottish Culture* No. 23 [2011], 141-144). The dictionaries tended to be poor recorders of material culture, though this is now being rectified by *Faclair na Gàidhlig (The Gaelic Dictionary)* and the *Digital Archive of Scottish Gaelic* or *DASG*. A significant amount of ‘material culture’ has survived in the literature of

Scottish Gaelic but has hitherto not been recognised. The schools of the SSPCK and Gaelic School Society (1811) produced two or three generations of Gaels literate in their own language. Many of these began to write and publish in the newsprint that proliferated after the rescinding of the Stamp Act in 1855. Clearance and emigration meant that many bright stars of this educated echelon used their skills to record their memories of childhood and growing up, for them a way of life lost but committed in detail to paper.

An example of a topic that contributes to the MSc syllabus is ‘shielings’ and transhumance. Summer transhumance has been extensively studied on the Continent and we have given less notice to this essential form of land-use and colonisation while studies of clearance and depopulation have predominated. With shielings we learn about settlement patterns, adaptation to the environment and basic rhythms of a sustainable economy over centuries but, at the same time, we learn about personal circumstances and responses since the shieling or *àirigh* bulked so large in popular culture. The evidence is abundant, between, perhaps, the lover’s shopping-list and her Renaissance taste in the well-known song from about 1600, *Bothan Àirigh am Bràigh Raithneach*, in which the shieling is characterised as the ‘bothy of love-making’, and the restrained sigh of the woman in the Eastern Highlands about the escape to the shielings from sermons and catechising :

*Fionna-ghleann mo chridhe, far nach bitheadh Didòmhnaich!*

[‘Finglen of my heart, where there would be no Sunday’]

As *Coda* for the above comments, I believe that AIMA’s competences reach to more of a symbiosis of museums and universities in material culture studies than has been achieved in the UK, beyond the efforts and achievements of a number of heroic curator-scholars over, say, the last half-century. Their record underpins the aims and ‘philosophy’ of the Material Culture & Gàidhealtachd History’ programme!

Sabhal Mòr Ostaig, Oilthigh na Gàidhealtachd ’s nan Eilean, An t-Sultain 2016, Hugh Cheape  
[hc.smo@uhi.ac.uk](mailto:hc.smo@uhi.ac.uk)



## First response to “Whither Material Culture” from Jose Luis Mingote Calderon in Spain

*The first AIMA member to respond to Hugh’s article is Jose Luis Mingote Calderon, Museo Nacional de Antropolog’a, Madrid, with his comments on the situation as he sees it in Spain. Hugh welcomes comments from other AIMA members and friends, so please do not hesitate to send in your own responses to Cozette Griffin-Kremer [griffin.kremer@wanadoo.fr](mailto:griffin.kremer@wanadoo.fr)*

I read Hugh’s text and there are things that appear to me very far from Spanish reality. Here, university anthropology provides no studies of material culture: there has been no renaissance of the subject in this field. We who still do research on material culture are effectively not “on the page”, and are left out of present-day trends (as also for “folk life”/“folklore”, terms that have long since fallen out of use). Here in Spain, this was very far from anthropology, although there is a journal called “Popular Traditions” in the CSIS (Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Cientificas).

It seems strange to me that at the present time, study of material culture would be associated with a particular language. In Spain, the connection of “words and things” was linked from the beginning of the 20th century to the principles of the German school of “Wörter und Sachen”, which later was to give rise to the linguistic and ethnographic atlases that were widely published in the 1960s and 1970s.

It strikes me as curious that at the end of the 20th and beginning of the 21st century, it would be possible to study traditional peasant culture in Scotland. Does it continue to exist? In Spain, this is absolutely impossible, as it disappeared fifty years ago.

That museum professionals give courses in the university is very rare in Spain and perhaps that, too, explains the slight importance of material culture here. It is clear that, in other countries, the same is not the case.

Jose Luis Mingote Calderon, Keeper of the European Collection in the National Anthropology Museum, Madrid, [jluis.mingote@meccd.es](mailto:jluis.mingote@meccd.es), with special thanks to Inja Smerdel for checking the translation from Spanish to English.



## Just how “authentic” are our sources concerning posture and gesture?

*A term that frequently comes up in conversations among museum professionals with their research colleagues, especially those working with demonstrations or re-enactments, is “authenticity”. In an enthralling encounter of two views, Thea Sawyer and Jose Luis Mingote Calderon have been kind enough to address this prickly issue for AIMA Newsletter readers as regards the specific questions of posture and gesture.*

*Their contributions have an origin in many “threads” – in the general discussions among AIMA members and their friends in the ALHFAM, EXARC, and other museum groups or associations. Most specifically and recently, in the September 2015 Society for Folk Life Studies meeting in the Black Country Living Museum in Dudley, England, “authenticity” came up several times in the Dudley setting of highly dangerous workplaces of the past. During that conference, Steve Burrow of the National Museum of Welsh Life presented a picture from the early days of re-assembling vernacular buildings, in which a mason is doing something many people no longer know how to do: stand, bend, lift, work, in positions that avoid fatigue and injury. Then, in his article on the young Moroccan attempting to set up an écomusée, researcher Christophe Belzgaou used a photograph of a man in a working posture at a counter-like surface. Finally, Jose Luis Mingote Calderon sent an announcement for the exhibit on Portuguese azulejo tiles at the Museu Nacional de Soares dos Reis, in Oporto, with an image of a woman sweeping (both articles are in AIMA Newsletter N°5), and the debate took wings.*

*Thea Sawyer is an American expert in body posture who did her EHESS (Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales, Paris) mémoire on the subject of pole yokes to carry milk pails and other heavy articles with former AIMA President François Sigaut. Jose Luis Mingote Calderon is Keeper of the European Ethnographic Collections at the National Museum of Anthropology in Madrid, and a specialist in the azulejo tiles.*

*NB the authors were kind enough to allow publication without any “harmonization” of their articles, which were written entirely separately. They had the opportunity to read each other only after the fact.*

## The complexity of evaluating *azulejos* and their genesis as sources for “authentic” posture and gesture by Jose Luis Mingote Calderon



As regards the question of posture, the official catalogue text notes that this concrete example enables us to examine the issue of posing in order to show an apparent realism which is totally planned (this *azulejo* panel entitled *Varrendo o milho* appeared in *Vila Beatriz* by Ermesinde as a copy of the photograph by Marques Abreu in his work *Vida rústica. Costumes e paisagens*, published in 1924). The woman in the foreground is sweeping corn on a threshing floor with a broom, with a gesture that seems to faithfully reflect this work. However, if we examine this in greater detail, we see that the woman is holding the broom in a strange way: with her right hand below the left in order to make the gesture of a right-handed person who would be bending over the threshing floor. If she were positioned in the correct way, she would be on the left of the threshing floor in the image, but the photograph would have lost all its graphic impact (as occurs in an Alvão photograph portraying a similar scene).

What is striking is that the perception of the period in relation to the pose is the antithesis of our own today. João Augusto Ribeiro, commenting on these photographs in the prologue to the book (Marques Abreu, 1924: [5 y 4]) believes that the photographer's work “is appropriate to the cult of the Beautiful and the Truth”, because it recognizes a subjective aesthetic. And what is most interesting for us today is Ribeiro's opinion that some of these photos capture the “naturalness of the movement”, while in others, people's gestures unite with the composition to provide a masterful work.

This image appears to be totally fabricated and is all the more spectacular for that. Older photographs were always prepared because the machines were cumbersome. There is another highly interesting text also used in the catalogue by Domingos Alvão, one of the most famous photographers, in which he tells us how he made his photos (with a tripod, positioning the person, checking his every gesture and ready to devote hours to making a single picture). In a 1913 interview connected with the *Exposição Nacional de Artes Gráficas* in Lisbon, Alvão explained the way he planned his photographs – as a circular shape in which he set out the human figures in the most harmoniously possible way. Even if they were humble and poor, they were to appear in dignified attitudes and he spared no effort to produce an interesting picture, working hours on a single photograph, noting his models were people without education, rough, as their work was rough. This meant giving them a delicate, intelligent and lively expression with a gallant smile, an intelligent and lively look, and “a natural placing of

*the arms, representing almost a miracle*". (Vieira, 1981: 46)". VIEIRA, J. (1981): "O fotógrafo Alvão a as suas pupilas", *Colóquio Artes*, 51, pp. 42- 49.

### **Conclusion:**

Taking into account everything that has changed in the world since the daguerrotype appeared, we have come to think that a picture transmits truth. However, if we analyse this, it can only be refuted, because we often have a document reduced to each concrete case. This is why we raise it to the status of "absolute truth", which is not certain. To complicate the matter even further, we suppose that the person doing the photography was working from the standpoint of an ethnographer intending to document, whereas they had a personal view that almost always included artistic considerations. Jose Luis Mingote Calderon

[jluis.mingote@mece.es](mailto:jluis.mingote@mece.es)



Jose Luis Mingote Calderon *Da fotografia ao azulejo*. Lisboa: Imprensa Nacional-Casa da Moeda, 2016.

"From photography to *azulejo* (decorative tiles). People, monuments and landscape of Portugal in the first half of the 20th century"



## **Natural practices of country people: bending with ease by Thea Sawyer**

Until recent times most people's activities included strenuous tasks such as bending, lifting, carrying, gardening and walking. Except in places where manual labor is still prevalent, automation and city living have caused us to become more sedentary. Physical changes we are hardly aware of have been the result of this transition. You may remember your grandparents straight as the letter "I", whereas we are stooped and we tire more easily than they did.

A recent issue of AIMA News announced an exhibit at the *Museu Nacional de Soares dos Reis* in Oporto of Portuguese *azulejos* (decorative tilework) with the photographs upon which the tiles are based. I quote: "*In this iconography we find many pictures of country people presented as the very epitome of the people*".

The photos date from the first half of the 20th century. It is exactly during this era that the changes in physicality began to take place. A closer look at the people of that time reveals their strength and their graceful physical demeanor. It takes a special eye to notice these attributes that are difficult to qualify. The image of the woman sweeping and those that follow will illustrate this point.

To that purpose my intention is to open your eyes to the efficiency of movement in all activities of daily life which was the norm at that time. As an example I will focus on bending.

In a photo of the Oporto exhibition, notice the gentle yet firm hold of the hands on the broom, the placement of the feet, apart enough to allow a sharp bend at the hips with a straight back and neck. An unhurried gentleness pervades the image.

Bending from the hips, typical of earlier times.



At first you might not notice these things, unless you consider the weight of the broom and the lifting that is required to sweep. The action of bending and lifting most clearly reveals how much our physical habits have changed. But this does not become obvious until you try to duplicate the action and I invite you to do exactly that.

Where do you feel effort or tension? How comfortable would you be repeating this movement, let's say for an hour or two? My guess is that you notice most of the effort in your upper body. You may even feel a strain in your back, which is an indication that your back is curved and you bend at the waist. To relieve the strain, try this. Push your behind out, which makes you bend at your hips with a straight back. The strain is now felt in the muscles of your buttocks and hamstrings. In other words, the only time there is strain on your back is when your back is bent.

Our equilibrium has changed. Past practice relied on strong feet, legs and buttocks, with the trunk pivoting at the hips and a straight back. Current practice is to bend at the waist, curving the back. Lower body strength has been replaced with upper body effort.



Current practice: bending at the waist curves the back. The hips stay fixed.



Past practice: bending at the hips with a flat back. Notice how far his "behind" is behind him!

### ***Bending at a counter***



The same principles apply. Who looks strong, who looks weak? Notice how the woman stands away from the counter, bending at the hips.

### ***Bending deeper***



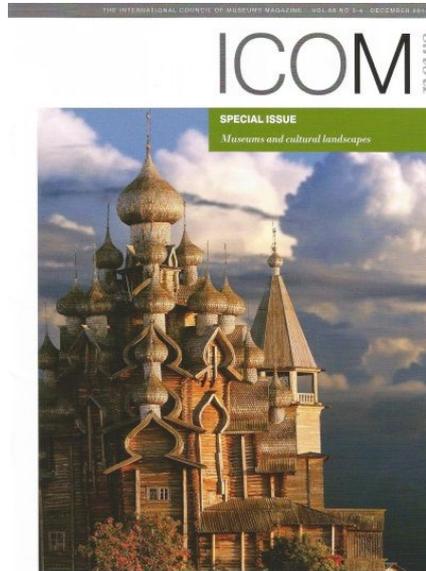
The mason at work here is perfectly comfortable in a position that seems tiring to our eyes. Look at the sharp angle of his hips and the long flat back.  
 Courtesy Steve Burrow and the Museum of Welsh Life

### ***Conclusion:***

My hope is that the increased awareness of physical efficiency may become visible to the observer of country people past and present, be it iconic or in real life. Where tradition endures, today's agricultural workers complete physical tasks in a manner that is energy efficient and harmonious. They don't fight gravity with muscular tension, but instinctively respond to a natural equilibrium that preserves strength and endurance. There is much to learn from that. It is indeed unfortunate that this innate well-being is no longer "*the epitome of the country people*". Thea Sawyer [theasawyer@gmail.com](mailto:theasawyer@gmail.com)



## ICOM news on *azulejos* heritage protection



ICOM News Vol. 68 N°3-4, December 2015, Special Issue, pp.13-14, has an extensive article entitled “Azulejo awareness” on the effects of more pronounced protection of the Portuguese heritage tiles, noting that creation of **SOS Azulejo** has led to a dramatic decrease in registered stolen *azulejos* since 2007. SOS Azulelo was created to counter both theft and neglect by the Portuguese Judiciary Police, sole law enforcement agency in the country responsible for crimes related to cultural heritage and, more importantly, for crime prevention. This action also involved preventive conservation and raising awareness of their value, and calling on a broad coalition of actors to commit to functioning effectively without any budget at all, providing skills and experts on a volunteer basis. Since good faith buyers now have ample online information on *azulejos* that may be stolen, the project has facilitated recovery by museums and private owners and also made it easier to prosecute bad faith buyers. In parallel, Lisbon municipal authority has enforced prohibitions on removing historical tiles from façades or demolishing buildings that have them, and the action is spreading to all cities. On the side of positive reinforcement, SOS Azulejo rewards good practices by officially recognizing academic studies, as well as artistic and community action to protect the tiles and using them in contemporary art and education. This project itself was recompensed in 2013 with the European Union Grand Prix for Cultural Heritage/Europa Nostra. CGK



## Noggins, traditional Irish wooden vessels by Claudia Kinmonth

*Claudia Kinmonth is an art historian specialising in the portrayal of household articles and furnishings of all kinds, of homes inside and out, popular customs and traditions in Ireland. She is also a member of the Society for Folk Life Studies, whose friendship and aid has been so valuable to the AIMA over the years. Her books, *Irish Rural Interiors in Art* (Yale University Press, 2006) and *Irish Country Furniture 1700-1950* (Yale UP, 1993), are classics widely used by scholars and curators. The following summary is from her article “**Noggins, ‘the nicest work of all’: traditional Irish wooden vessels for eating and drinking**”, which appeared in the journal of *The Irish Georgian Society, Irish Architectural and Decorative Studies*, Vol. XVIII, 2016, pp. 130-151.*

*A **thought experiment** will help you prepare for the delights of noggin-viewing with X-ray technology: put your hands together and interlace the fingers so that your fingertips go right to mid-palm, then look at the backs of your hands – you will see only the outside of the “secret” you will discover below.*



Figure 1 (see Newsletter front page) and 2: Woven noggin of 11 oak staves of varying widths, with ash wood outer band, shown upright and resting upside-down on the stave handle, to drain.

Long a neglected artefact in Irish material culture, ‘noggin’ is one of the several terms for the small, hand-made, multi-purpose wooden vessel often contrasted with the somewhat larger ‘piggin’. Noggins have become rare and represent a challenge to museum conservation, because they shrink and disintegrate, if allowed to get too dry. Hence, it is of paramount importance to apply an interdisciplinary methodology to museum and private collections in order to place noggins in a broadly contextual framework, and equally vital to enlist the knowledge and skills of a master cooper to reproduce them. Noggins have their secrets, which the utilisation of dental X-ray and a three-dimensional XRadia machine have revealed. This might otherwise be a totally “lost” art, as the noggin-makers’ work was eclipsed by cheaper ceramic and metal vessels over the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.



Figure 3: attributed to Daniel Maclise (1806-1870), untitled. This drawing from Kerry shows a communal meal of potatoes, in a wooden hoop, eaten with “kitchen” of butter, eggs and milk. Note the two differently sized, hooped, staved noggins, the larger one in the adult’s hand upper right, the smaller second noggin on the table behind the adult’s left hand. From T.C. Croker & R. Adolphus Lynch, *Legends of the Lakes, or sayings and Doings at Killarney*, II (London, 1829), 154.

The term ‘noggin’ may have been adopted into Irish life along with the introduction of English dairying methods during the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Tudor plantations meant to “pacify” the conquered Irish population. If noggins became a standard feature of everyday life even among the poorer households, they were equally attested by inventories in the kitchens of the ‘big houses’, probably for use by servants. They were multi-purpose, as drinking and eating vessels, measures, scoops, dippers and ladles, that held together without problems if kept in contact with liquids and in the humid environment of thatched houses. They were also the sign of hospitality, left in a bucket of spring water near the farmhouse door for the thirsty passerby.



Figure 4: four noggins and a piggin, Courtesy Collection Victor Mee, Cloverhill, Co. Cavan. The large piggin is 21 cm in diameter at the base; the upended noggin at right is 11 cm in diameter at the base.

Noggins had ergonomic features such as the tapering at the top of the staves which enabled effective and comfortable pouring or drinking thanks to the stave handle. They were usually slightly conical, being narrower towards the base, and some noggins were even oval rather than circular in shape, adding to the complexity of the construction. Surviving examples bear witness to three main types of construction. The most robust were made by coopers or cask-makers with oak staves usually bound with iron. Such objects necessitated considerable skills, and coopers trained for seven years to do ‘wet’ (liquid), ‘dry’ (foodstuffs) and ‘white’ (dairy vessels) work, the wet and white work at times kept watertight by insertion of a bulrush (*Cyperaceae*) into the joints. A lighter, more quickly produced version could be made on a pole-lathe by a woodturner using green (unseasoned) wood, which tended to split easily, if not regularly used. The third method involved ‘weaving’ thin bands of ash, soaked in water and beetled (beaten). The master cooper advising on re-construction comments that using wood from branches of an ash tree, rather than the trunk, would provide more flexibility and strength on a tight curve, allowing the noggin to shrink and tighten suitably as it dried, while remaining lightweight.



Figure 5: three noggins of contrasting construction, Courtesy Jimmy Moore: left, oak with 8 staves, 14-cm inset base; middle, woven with 13 staves and 7 ash fingers with V-shaped divisions, the ‘fingers’ overlapping from the left; right, lathe-turned, one-piece, probably willow.

And here comes the secret! The University of Limerick’s high-specification 3D X-ray microscope (XRadia XRM500) was used for the first time to investigate an early wooden artefact, revealing the hidden construction of how each band curves inwards, ending with five spade-shaped ‘fingers’ separated neatly by four U shapes. The noggin ‘weaver’ had reduced one band end to a feather-edged taper over 10 cm, then cut small holes, each in the shape of an elongated ‘D’ into which five tapered, spade-shaped fingers were squeezed to lock the construction, obviously all without gluing. This formed an arrowhead, one-way interlock guaranteeing an attractive and useful flatness that avoided cracking. These secret ‘tricks of the trade’ may well have enabled noggin weavers to compete effectively in the market. This secrecy of technique did not pass unnoticed: an 1870s admirer wrote that the craft bore witness to “the exercise of invention or genius – the noggins of one generation being the exact facsimile” of their forebears, and they were long-lived, resilient to constant scouring, to be set ‘snow-white’ on the shelves of the home’s dresser for all to see.

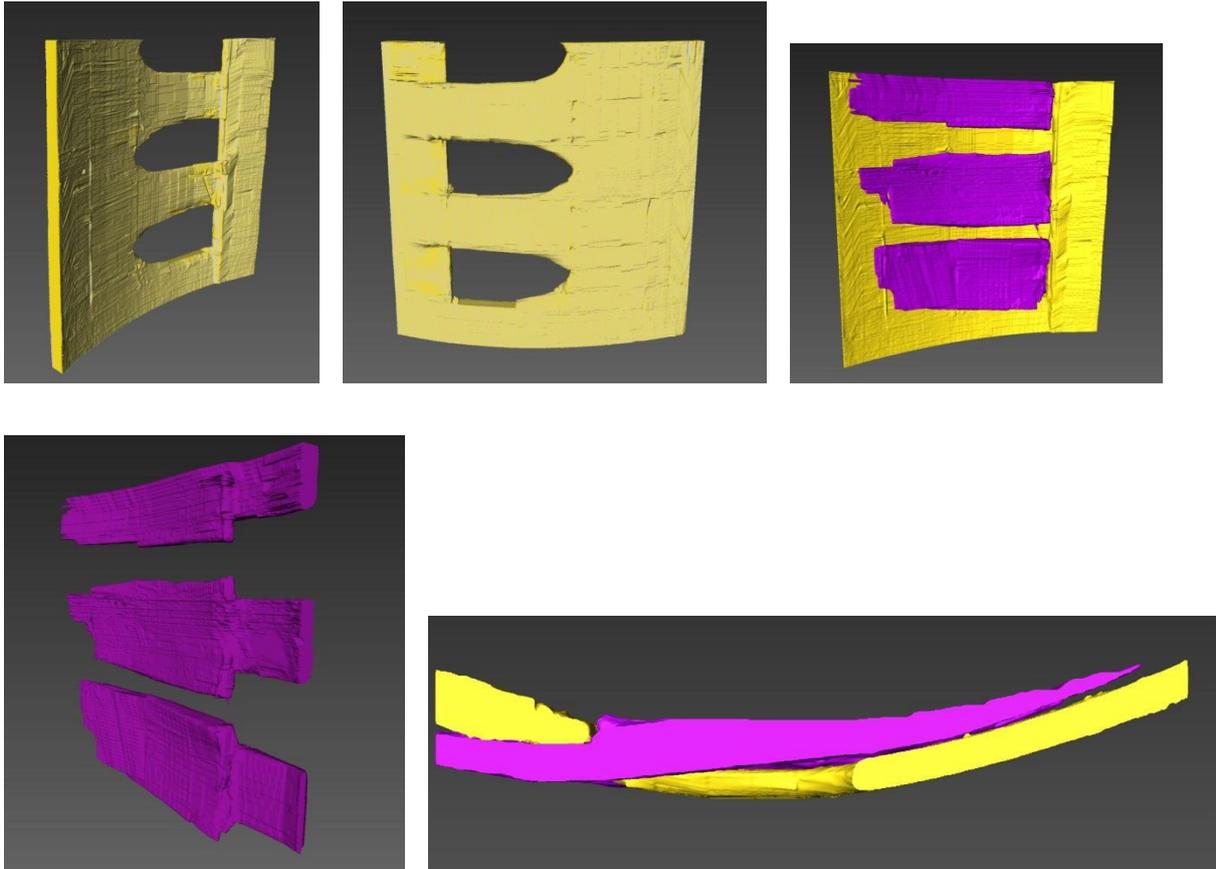


Figure 6 series: XRadia images of noggin, Courtesy University of Limerick

Of course, there was variation in construction: in the numbers of ‘fingers’, the shapes (V rather than U), the gaps between them, even in the hidden interlocks. Further research, for example on Viking cooperage and artefacts in waterlogged milieux, may reveal that the techniques are in fact far older, even prehistoric. Demand for them certainly would have been high before the novelty of inexpensive ceramic wares, and noggins are portrayed in paintings as sold by itinerant peddler-makers at the great fairs. Portrayals of the quiet interiors of homes show them set in their upside-down draining position on the dresser. They were certainly long preferred to metal vessels for dairy work, as the wood did not taint the taste and some woods may even have been chosen for their anti-microbial properties, though they were traditionally kept clean by scrubbing after each use, often with silver sand, which scoured effectively without scratching.

Noggins were such a central part of life that they gave rise to many expressions, typically, for the head, and a thriving child was said to be such a happy eater that he would even try to eat up “a stave out of his noggin”. The noggin has now taken its place as the smallest wooden object of accomplished complex construction in the repertoire of Irish vernacular furniture and an object of distinction in Ireland’s material culture. It also came to epitomize the harsh realities of life, as well, that have been left behind – when someone in a good job died, people said that now there would be “a noggin and spoon for someone else”.

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## Photo Essay: French *surjous*



Photo Jacques Holtz



Photo Lucie Markey

There are many names for this charming complement to cattle draft – *surjou* or *soubrejoug* (both ‘overyoke’), *clocher* (bell spire), *chapelle* (chapel) typical of the Pyrenees regions, especially in the central French highlands and foothills, as well as in the Garonne River valleys, right into the 1940s (Hautes-Pyrénées, Gers, Haute-Garonne, Tarn-et-Garonne, Ariège). Hewn out from a log of sycamore and occasionally elm, they were painted in bright colours, at times with decorative copper nails added, and were winter work often done by the farmers themselves, attached by a peg or pin in the centre of the yoke. Great objects of emulation, their makers strove for original designs of beauty and musicality, conferred by combinations of different-sized bells.



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Courtesy Olivier Courthiade, Photo C. Griffin-Kremer

They were important for their practical uses, indicating a team was underway in poor visibility on often rough roads and paths, and may have lent real encouragement to the animals harnessed, signaling the beginning of the working day and converging with the rhythm of their own pace. Popular tradition also credited them with staving off lightning strike or evil spirits. Among the finest illustrations of their diversity can be found in the source this summary is based on, Mariel Jean-Brunhes Delamarre’s *La Vie Agricole et Pastorale dans le Monde*, Grenoble: Glénat, 1999, 130-131.

Fortunately, contrary to Delamarre’s lament that these artefacts had entered the realm of the now forgotten, they have become an object of highly charged (and highly priced) emulation once again in the areas they were traditional in. Just check out the term *surjou* in a search machine. With the kind permission of Jacques Holtz, Lucie Markey and Olivier Courthiade.

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## Coming Soon

