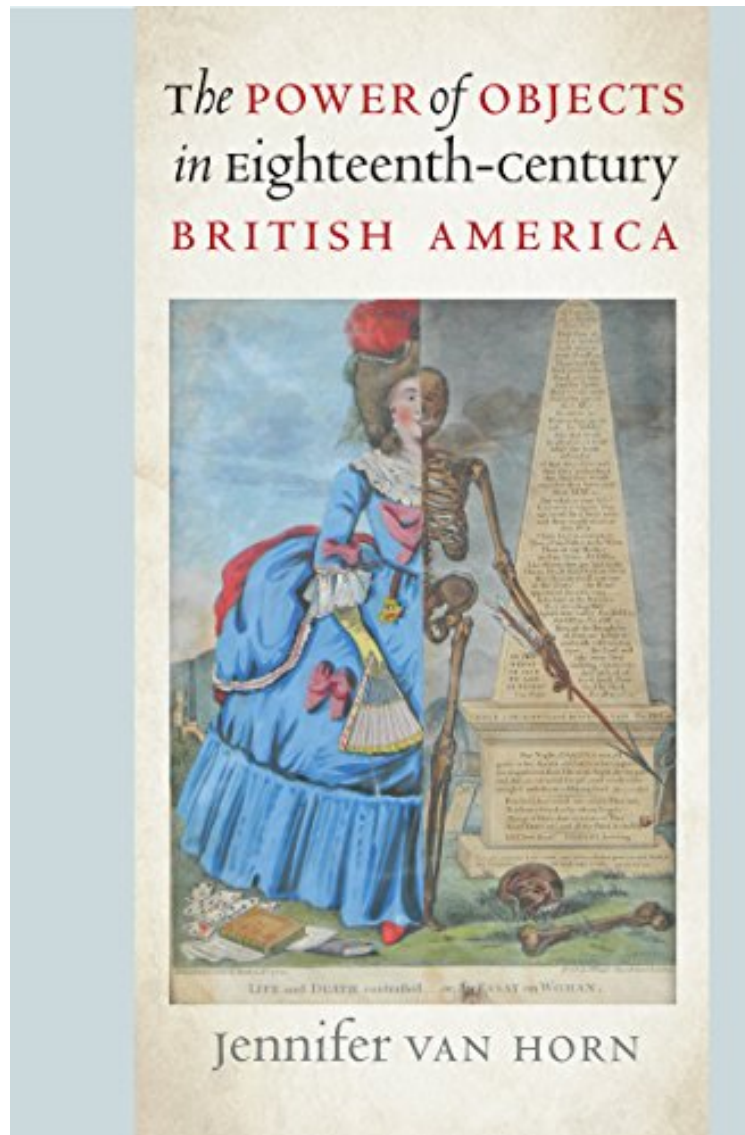


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## The Power of Objects in Eighteenth-Century British America (Published by the Omohundro Institute of Early American History and Culture and the University of North Carolina Press)

Jennifer Van Horn

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**Jennifer Van Horn : The Power of Objects in Eighteenth-Century British America (Published by the Omohundro Institute of Early American History and Culture and the University of North Carolina Press)**

before purchasing it in order to gauge whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised *The Power of Objects in Eighteenth-Century British America* (Published by the Omohundro Institute of Early American History and Culture and the University of North Carolina Press):

1 of 1 people found the following review helpful. *An Exploration of the Roots of American Materialism* By Anna Faktorovich An art history and a cultural study of civility in America. It explores the roots of early American materialism, documented by the increase of diverse purchases. The study argues that these objects created an appearance of civility despite the distance from the center of the civilized world, England. Somehow furniture and clothing is put on the same plane as literary works, as if they are of equal cultural value. In particular, this is a study of Anglo-American society, which Van Horn argues attempted to separate itself from their African-American and Native American neighbors with finery that indicated their relatively higher status. The cover is a bit more bitter and biting than the summary of the book, as it is an illustration of a finely dressed woman holding a fan on half of a page, and a skeleton holding an error with a dismembered, bloody skeleton and bone by her feet on the other side. With over a hundred images in the book, thankfully all of them have been professionally edited and taken. The bulk probably was done by archive and museum photographers that polished them. These venues frequently charge a good deal for this work, so this book has been handsomely fiscally supported. Oddly, at least one of the images might have been reproduced twice, once in black and white and once in color; its the Upper Case, Folding Glasses Pulled Out, Dressing Table, Made for Margaret Maria Livingston from the New York Historical Society, which is also identified as the copyrights holder for the photo (205). Other images include portraits of aristocrats, grand architectural designs, and satirical cartoons. The cartoons poke fun at many of the fineries that the book is arguing separated their wearers into a higher class. For example, *The Folly of 1771* shows a hairdresser sculpting an upraised hairstyle that's so tall he needs a ladder to get to the tip (285). There is a great deal of curious information offered, such as how the ladies assembled the toilettes (302), and a section on the over use of makeup (312). The latter includes a cartoon that still hits on the truth today, *Six Stages of Mending a Face* (1792), wherein a woman starts out with saggy breaks, toothless, and hairless and across the set of six images puts all sorts of objects on to make herself look youthful and attractive (313). These images are accompanied by reflections on beauty from respected American politicians and scholars of the time, such as Thomas Jefferson. This is a great book for anybody that wants to understand the roots of the modern, American materialistic culture. In England, aristocrats were pressured to dress in fineries as a show of status, but in America addiction to materialistically attained beauty became a competition that has continued to drive the poor into debt.

Over the course of the eighteenth century, Anglo-Americans purchased an unprecedented number and array of goods. *The Power of Objects in Eighteenth-Century British America* investigates these diverse artifacts from portraits and city views to gravestones, dressing furniture, and prosthetic devices to explore how elite American consumers assembled objects to form a new civil society on the margins of the British Empire. In this interdisciplinary transatlantic study, artifacts emerge as key players in the formation of Anglo-American communities and eventually of American citizenship. Deftly interweaving analysis of images with furniture, architecture, clothing, and literary works, Van Horn reconstructs the networks of goods that bound together consumers in Boston, New York, Philadelphia, and Charleston. Moving beyond emulation and the desire for social status as the primary motivators for consumption, Van Horn shows that Anglo-Americans' material choices were intimately bound up with their efforts to distance themselves from Native Americans and African Americans. She also traces women's contested place in forging provincial culture. As encountered through a woman's application of makeup at her dressing table or an amputee's donning of a wooden leg after the Revolutionary War, material artifacts were far from passive markers of rank or political identification. They made Anglo-American society.

Imaginatively developed, extensively documented, and well written. Recommended.--Choice Jennifer Van Horn opens our eyes and minds with her masterful exploration of the centrality of objects to the identity politics of eighteenth-century British America. Bringing portraiture, dressing tables, gravestones, and even a wooden leg into a dynamic and provocative conversation, she vividly instructs us that history is inscribed in material things in ways that transcend the limits of the written word.--Bernard L. Herman, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill In the surprising and welcome florescence of new books on eighteenth-century American art and material culture, Van Horn's stands out as one of the most meticulously researched and engagingly written. Reading text against object and object against text, she draws us into a richly variegated world of human actors, motivations, and divergent worldviews and convincingly extrapolates behavior and belief from an unlikely series of assemblages.--Margaretta M. Lovell, University of California, Berkeley The best book I've read in years in any field of early American studies; I cannot imagine a more thorough, innovative, and riveting account of the challenge of crafting civility in this period. Van Horn dexterously

combines art history and material culture studies, showing a keen sensitivity to the way American civility was tenuously defined both by aesthetic models in the high-style metropole and by more proximate examples of Native and African American material culture. The writing is elegant and lucid and crackles with saucy humor.--Jennifer L. Roberts, Harvard University

About the Author Jennifer Van Horn is assistant professor of art history and history at the University of Delaware.