

VISUAL ANTHROPOLOGY

Photography as a Research Method



REVISED AND EXPANDED EDITION

John Collier, Jr., and Malcolm Collier

Foreword by Edward T. Hall

Chapter 5 The Cultural Inventory

The concept of inventory is usually associated with the listing of material goods, as in a store, or the listing of artifacts from an archeological site. But a cultural inventory can go beyond material items to become a detailing of human functions, the quality of life, and the nature of psychological well-being. The photographic inventory can record not only the range of artifacts in a home but also their relationship to each other, the style of their placement in space, all the aspects that define and express the way in which people use and order their space and possessions. Such information not only provides insight into the present character of people's lives but can also describe acculturation and track cultural continuity and change.

John Roberts, of Cornell University, made the pioneering effort in controlled cultural inventory in his complete recording of three Navajo households near Ramah, New Mexico (1951). He used photography in his publication to illustrate the surface character of the hogans, but the elaborate listing of objects, to our knowledge, was done entirely with a notebook. This study remains impressive and excites speculation as to what could be concluded from such effort, for Dr. Roberts has left up to the reader what the implications of family property might be.

The value of an inventory is based upon the assumption that the "look" of a home reflects who people are and the way they cope with the problems of life. John Honigmann states this proposition:

Cultural inventories are rich sources of insight. John Collier recording in a Pueblo Indian home, New Mexico.



A bookcase can become an informal shrine that reflects family concerns and character. (Photo by Edward Bigelow)

An inspection of material culture may contribute insights into character structure and reveal emotional qualities. Product analysis entails examining utilitarian constructions, like houses and toboggans, to determine the values they embody, as revealed, for example, in careless or perfectionistic construction. The proportion of non-utilitarian objects to utilitarian objects in a culture may also be meaningful. Type and number of possessions may reveal drives and aspirations in a class structured community (1954:134).

Jurgen Ruesch and Weldon Kees emphasize the importance of the use of objects in the identities and expressions of people and cultures.

The selection of objects and the nature of their grouping constitute nonverbal expressions of thought, need, conditions, or emotions. Thus, when people shape their surroundings, they introduce man-made order (1956:94).

Foremost in the array of things that men have ordered are the objects with which they surround themselves in their own homes. . . . [Though] not

An
ords th
of other
reflect c
groups
Edward

Home a
camp w





family concerns

te insights
qualities.

etermine
ple, in
portion of
culture

in a class

the importance of
ns of people and

r grouping
need,
hape their
r (1956:94).
have
und
] not

everyone is fortunate enough to live in a structure built to meet the demands of his own taste . . . every building indicates in some way whether or not it is representative of those who live in it. This is particularly true about interiors, where the nature and arrangement of possessions say a great deal about their owners' views of existence (1956:132).

An inventory not only deals with material content, it also records the arrangement and use of space. The spatial configuration of otherwise ordinary objects, common to a mass society, may often reflect or express the cultural patterns and values of distinct cultural groups or may provide insight into the well-being of the inhabitants. Edward T. Hall comments on the use of space:

. . . the inside of the Western house is organized spatially. Not only are there special rooms for special functions—food preparation, eating, entertaining and socializing, rest, recuperation and procreation—but for sanitation as well. If, as sometimes happens, either the artifacts or the activities associated with one space are transferred to another space, this fact is immediately

Home away from home in the Canadian Arctic. Each bunk in this oil camp was a reflection of the inhabitant.



apparent. People who "live in a mess" or a "constant state of confusion" are those who fail to classify activities and artifacts according to a uniform, consistent, or predictable spatial plan (1966:97).

The content and organization of a home is usually a reflection of its inhabitants that, if read properly, can give considerable understanding of the people themselves. Home inventories have been a routine assignment for students in classes taught by the authors at San Francisco State University, both in visual anthropology and Asian American studies. These inventories have demonstrated, on numerous occasions, the richness of the inventory content.

In one case, Filipino American students were able to define both the ethnic identity of the inhabitants of a home and the time of their arrival in the United States from photographs of a Filipino American home in which there were *no* overtly Filipino artifacts. The key to their reading of the photographs lay in details of spatial use and the arrangement of common household items, all of which could have been bought at any suburban shopping center. A comparison of photographs of homes of different Asian American groups clearly demonstrated that each group maintained culturally distinct homes, as reflected not only by explicitly ethnic artifacts but also by the range of objects chosen from the larger American scene and the manner in which homes were organized and maintained.

The cultural inventory offers, then, one of the richest pools of data which can be gathered photographically. Just what *can* be studied responsibly in the details of an American home? Here are some of the questions that can be asked in relation to the cultural inventory:

WHAT IS THE ECONOMIC LEVEL?

The condition of the furniture, rugs, wallpaper, curtains may reflect economic adequacy, poverty, or a conscious rejection of the symbols of material affluence.

Economic stress often shows throughout the home's possessions, and economic stress necessarily limits the range of *choice* in the determining of style.

WHAT IS THE STYLE?

Home styles have a great deal to do with life-styles; some ways of life are associated with one style, other ways with another. Some styles reflect regional background, with their prototypes in the midwestern farmhouse or the California ranch home. Others may reflect European or Asian models.

Some styles have names which represent quite specific models in materials, aesthetics, and use: for example, Early American, Traditional, Modern, Louis Quinze, Empire, Provincial, Danish Modern.

Each area has a going value system, for example in San Francisco, a Nob Hill apartment and a Pacifica tract home call up entirely different images.

Style often places the household in the class and status structure.

WHAT IS THE AESTHETIC OF THE DECOR?

Not only pictures on the wall, but every object of decoration, each item selected and kept for its own sake, is a clue to the owners' value system.

These reflect ethnic identity or affinity, religious expression, political sentiment, and aesthetic judgments.

They may have a subject-content focus: Nature orientation, open spaces, mountains, seas, forests, gardens, wild animals; social orientation, scenes of history, humanity, children, dogs, cats; nonrepresentational, interested in form or color rather than content.

They may show a distinct preference for one or several styles; Traditional Euro-American styles: biblical, Greek, Roman, Renaissance art, Old Masters, established "masterpieces"; Progressive styles: modern art, abstraction, nonobjectivity, industrial ornaments, parts of machines as elements of industrial design, beauty as function, Oriental or exotic designs and ornaments, primitive art.

They may express ethnic or cultural identity: Pendelton blankets, ceremonial objects, bows, religious shrines and figures, paintings, modern "folk art" associated with a particular ethnic group.

WHAT ARE THE ACTIVITIES OF THE HOUSEHOLD?

The house may be only to eat and sleep in, or it may be the scene of and the product of a great deal of activity, work, play, and socialization.

It may give evidence of self-expression: craft, "do-it-yourself" home furnishings, needlework, textiles, modelmaking; artwork, drawings, paintings, sculpture—made by the inhabitants or their personal circle of friends; children's school art.

Is the home a standardized copy of magazine taste, or does it show inventiveness of these people?

Are there organic interests—plants, birds, goldfish, pets, nature collections?

Is there music in the house? Music produced here, piano or other instruments, sheet music, music stands; music listened to, record player, stacks or cabinets of records, hi-fi equipment, radio. Are sports and games represented? Evidence of active sports, equipment, trophies, games, toys, for children, for adults, or both.

Evidence of sports interest (spectator sports), pictures of Joe Montana, etc., sports schedules, newspaper sports page, sports magazines.

What is the level of literate interest in the household? Quantity and choice of books, standard works, classics, text books, best sellers, detective stories, extensive library on one or several subjects, poetry, art books, avant-garde works; magazines—women's magazines, sports magazines, news magazines, political comment, girlie magazines,

continued on next page

newspapers, funny books, religious tracts—all help to categorize the mental concerns of the inhabitants.

Is the home the place for social life? For the family only, or for the entertainment of friends? The answer may be reflected in organization as well as content; there may be a formal living room, informal room for family and friends, private areas for family only.

Is eating a major focus of family values? Food technology and attitudes are often culturally determined, often reflected in kitchen tools and the inventory of cupboard shelves.

WHAT IS THE CHARACTER OF ORDER?

The order of the home may reflect the means by which people pattern their lives. "A place for everything and everything in its place," represents one ideal of mastery over the material objects of life's circumstances. This could be evidence of one kind of organized personality, or it might represent a psychological compulsion.

Mess is the clutter and chaos that accumulates as things are *not* in a reasonable place, either because the reason of their ordering is not established or because the housekeeping function is not being fulfilled, for whatever reason of insufficiency of time, energy, health, or motivation.

Another form of clutter occurs, even when things are "in their place," if there are too many things or if the basis of their ordering is unreasonable or interferes in some way with function.

WHAT ARE THE SIGNS OF HOSPITALITY AND RELAXATION?

In "mainstream" American culture, by cues of placement and ordering of furniture, we know when we come into a room whether we are expected to remain standing or sit down, and if we are to sit down, where, and how. Furniture is placed to offer hospitality or refuse it. A bookcase may invite you to help yourself, or it may prompt you to ask first, or it may be so forbidding you would never think of doing more than looking. Each culture has such patterned messages.

The different styles of furnishings present different values of hospitality. Sometimes roles are clearly defined in formal fashion. Sometimes informality is given the higher value. The attitude expressed in "If I'd known you were coming I'd 've baked a cake!" has its expression in many details of furniture choice and arrangement.

In evaluating the cultural cues, we have to ask, what does this kind of a chair mean in this particular setting?

REVIEW OF TWO CULTURAL INVENTORY PROJECTS

The procedures for making a cultural inventory with the camera can be explored through discussion of two research efforts involving use of the cultural inventory. The first was carried out in the Peruvian Andes and the second in an urban setting in California.

The
Navajo l
ventory
the And
versity o
anthropo
take ove
zens of l
or progr
program
ricultura
an expan
were int
vide the
determin
tion as a

After
graphic
systemat
ilies. A r
proceede
in the sa
would r
some ca
cienda. F
harvest
but it wa
in even
inventor

AR
from w
the need
culture v
a few hu
well as h
Innovati
diminish
reflected
America
including
on the p
any othe
Pub
and othe