

Glasgow School of Art Course Specification
Course Title: Material Cultures in Creative Research

Please note that this course specification is correct on the date of publication but may be subject to amendment prior to the start of the 2026-27 Academic Year.

Course Code:	HECOS Code:	Academic Session:
PELC244		2026-27

1. Course Title:
Material Cultures in Creative Research

2. Date of Approval:	3. Lead School:	4. Other Schools:
PACAAG August 2025	School of Design	This course is available to students on PGT programmes which include a Stage 2 elective.

5. Credits:	6. SCQF Level:	7. Course Leader:
20	11	Dr Eleanor Herring

8. Associated Programmes:
This course is available to students on PGT programmes which include a Stage 2 elective.

9. When Taught:
Stage 2, taught as a blended postgraduate elective

10. Course Aims:
The overarching aims of the Stage 2 electives are as follows: • Encourage interdisciplinary, critical reflexivity from within an open set of choices; • Foster deep investigative approaches to new or unfamiliar areas of practice and theory; • Cultivate self-directed leadership and initiative-taking in both applied and abstract modes of practice/ study not necessarily associated with a student's particular creative specialism; • Enable flexible, ethical exploration and connection of diverse knowledge and understanding within a specialist programme of study. This course draws upon wide and established multi-disciplinary expertise and theoretical enquiry at the Glasgow School of Art. This cross-disciplinary elective course aims to develop research strategies, approaches and methods in order to interrogate 'the meanings of things represented in artefacts'. It will explore alternative routes into 'things', especially those objects, interventions and artefacts within, or produced by, art school studio practices. One central belief of this course is that meaning is ceaselessly tested out and reinvented 'in the making', with the additional recognition that objects of art and design often escape or resist linear interpretation. The term and the concept 'Material culture' is familiar in an everyday sense to art and design students as

they are embedded in the world of artefacts. What this course seeks is to bring these ideas to consciousness and offer various theoretical avenues to unpack and unpick objects and cultural discourses with development of critical awareness—respecting the views both of themselves and others.

This course also aims to address this postgraduate phase of creative self-development, by literally putting things into words. Contemporary art school preoccupations offer a useful conduit through which to expand upon studio practices and ideas—from the investigation of bodily practices of display and self-presentation, through to rituals of death and commemoration (to take just two examples). Thus, in the art school context, material cultural studies can offer creative and conceptually rich insights for thinking through theory and practice in action.

The aims of this course are therefore to:

- Introduce students to a range of theories and practical applications of material culture studies;
- Interrogate the relationships between material culture theory and methodologies and creative practices;
- Encourage students to frame deep investigative approaches to new areas of practice and theory through verbal reasoning, practice, and empirical research;
- Facilitate interdisciplinary debate, critical reflexivity, and practical connections, by bringing together students on different programmes of study;
- Explore and interrogate established assumptions and practices through flexible, ethical considerations of other contemporary fields of culture

11. Intended Learning Outcomes of Course:

On successful completion of this course students will be able to:

- Develop a rationale for applying selected material culture methods to art or design studio practices;
- Debate and analyse a number of material culture approaches from a critical perspective;
- Explore cross-disciplinary approaches within creative research and demonstrate how ideas, methods and practices interrelate in this area;
- Develop and defend an ethically considered practical or theoretical research project proposal within the subject area based on independent research;
- Consider new approaches to creative practices beyond established western traditions and evaluate the contribution made to art and design research and practice through the study of alternative non-textual sources.

12. Indicative Content:

The course curriculum content is intercultural, reflecting different social and cultural perspectives of students, with negotiated self-directed research outcomes that include personal comment and insight, but that also builds awareness of this rich academic field of practice and debate through supported readings and hands-on learning. Material culture enquiries are by nature interdisciplinary and exploratory, and can deliver unexpected and nuanced insights even into the most stereotyped areas.

The course contains the following indicative content:

- Material culture: history and methods
- The life of materials - material biographies
- 'Designing ourselves'- material culture and the body, identity, belonging and memory

- Material landscapes, sites, artefacts, spaces and systems
- Creative practices/ the politics and ethics of production
- Animating the past
- Receiving Material Culture: Fans, Readerships and Audiences
- Affective materialities, and cultural biographies of scent
- The everyday
- The afterlife of objects and 'thing' theories
- Contemporary craft revivals - status and authority of craft skills
- Cognitive and manual activity, tacit knowledge
- Digital materialities/immaterialities
- Curating material cultures: museum collections, and the politics of representation
- Postcolonialism and decolonisation
- The limits of material culture

The course will be delivered through a mixture of workshops and presentations (with both student- and tutor-led activities), visits to sites and archives and other studio-based investigations within each individual student's specialist area.

13. Description of Summative Assessment Methods:

Assessment Method	Description of Assessment Method	Weight %	Submission week (assignments)
Final assignment containing the following two compulsory components Practical Submission (negotiated practice-based artefact) AND Written Critical Commentary	1) This can include selection of found object(s) or 'assisted readymade' artefact within specialist studio area 2) Written critical commentary (3,000 words) on the research process (arising from the project proposal) and outcome plus bibliography.	100%	Week 11, Stage 2

13.1 Please describe the Summative Assessment arrangements:

The final submission is open-ended and studio-centred, respecting the intensive nature of the masters' programme and is in two parts:

1. A negotiated practice-based artefact. This artefact can include any kind of object trouvé (found object) including sound recordings, film, etc and can thus be truly open to all areas of masters study

And
2. A written critical commentary of 3,000 words on the final research outcome, drawing on readings and activities encountered during the course.

The Project proposal and final assignment are to be submitted direct to course leader for marking and moderation (to be arranged within the course teaching team).

14. Description of Formative Assessment Methods:
A 600-word written proposal which relates to your summative assessment to be submitted in week 5 including relevant bibliography, sources and resources to be used.
Feedback is also provided on a weekly basis within the workshop/presentation sessions which include student presentations and peer discussions.
14.1 Please describe the Formative Assessment arrangements:
Students will receive formative comments on the initial project proposal (week 6) and will be offered individual tutorials to support students in the development of their final drafts for their assignment.

15. Learning and Teaching Methods:	
Formal Contact Hours	Notional Learning Hours
20	200
15.1 Description of Teaching and Learning Methods:	
Timetable: Course is offered over 10 weeks, 2 hours a week. Delivered on Wednesdays or Fridays	

16. Pre-requisites:
Successful completion of PGT Stage I

17. Can this course be taken by Exchange/Study Abroad students?	Yes
18. Are all the students on the course taught wholly by distance learning?	No
19. Does this course represent a work placement or a year of study abroad?	No
20. Is this course collaborative with any other institutions?	No
20.1 If yes, then please enter the names of the other teaching institutions:	
N/A	

21. Additional Relevant Information:
Material culture studies is the examination of objects and artefacts left behind by human activities and culture; evaluating objects as traces of human relationships and beliefs. In the past, scholars in anthropology or archaeology started to collect objects in order to study societies without 'history' (no written records). More recently, 'material culture studies' has taken off in order to study our own hidden histories and everyday practices in ordinary contemporary societies that lie outside high or official cultural expression, such as those of dress, the domestic sphere, or sexuality. Given the imperial European roots of anthropology and archaeology, current material culture scholars have established contemporary and critical self-reflective debates that address a post-colonial present. This field offers clear avenues into re-thinking and diverting Western art school preoccupations into the study of other localised design and artistic practices, fields and discourses in the current global range of creative production.
Established academic approaches to material cultures in other disciplines have not yet engaged fully with the multi-materiality and flexibility of works of art and design, or the role of the senses in this field. This course addresses these gaps and will examine the object as a site of complex (and often simultaneous) sensual/emotional negotiation, in relation to gender, sexuality and age.

It will examine the material meanings of specific sites of production (e.g. studio, street, print room) and the material cultures of audiences, readers, and users of artefacts.

22. Indicative Bibliography:

- Appadurai, Arjun, ed (1986) *The social life of things: commodities in cultural perspective* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press
- Attfield, Judy (2000) *Wild things: the material culture of everyday life* Oxford: Berg
- Bennett, Tony and Patrick Joyce, eds (2010) *Material powers: cultural studies, history and the material turn* London: Routledge
- Boivin, Nicole (2008) *Material cultures, material minds* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press
- Brown, Bill (2001) 'Thing theory' *Critical inquiry* 28 (1): 1-22
- Buchli, Victor, ed (2002) *The Material Culture Reader*, Oxford
- Candlin, Fiona and Raiford Guins, eds (2009) *The object reader* London and New York: Routledge
- Harman, G. (2009) 'Technology, objects and things in Heidegger' *Cambridge Journal of Economics* (online)
- Harvey, Karen, ed (2009) *History and material culture: a student's guide to approaching alternative sources* London and New York: Routledge
- Hicks, Dan and Mary C. Beaudry (2010) *The Oxford handbook of material culture studies* Oxford: Oxford University Press
- Highmore, Ben (2002) *Everyday life and cultural theory: an introduction* London: Routledge
- Margolin 2009
- Kingery, W. David (1995) *Learning from Things: Method and Theory of Material Cultural Studies*, Washington and London, Smithsonian Institution Press
- Kwint, Marius, Christopher Breward and Jeremy Aynsley, eds (1999) *Material memories* Oxford: Berg
- Miller, Daniel (1987) *Material culture and mass consumption* Oxford: Blackwell
- Miller, Daniel, ed. (2001) *Home Possessions: Material Culture Behind Closed Doors*, Oxford
- Moles, Abraham A. and David W. Jacobus (1988) 'Design and immateriality: what of it in a post-industrial society?' *Design issues* 4 (1/2): 25-32
- Simondon, Gilbert (2010) 'The Genesis of the Technical Object: the Process of Concretization', from '*Du Mode d'Existence Des Objets Techniques*' by Gilbert Simondon in *The Craft Reader*, edited by Glenn Adamson, Berg, Oxford and New York, 2010, pp. 354-359.
- Tilley, Christopher (1999) *Metaphor and material culture* Oxford: Blackwell
- Tilley, Christopher, Webb Keane, Susanne Kuchler, Mike Rowlands and Patricia Spyer, eds (2013) *Handbook of material culture* London: Sage