



Exploring Material Culture in the Classroom

The following questions and activities are designed to be used in conjunction with the analysis of *any* object.

A Closer Look

1. Study the object. What do you see? What questions come up after you've examined the artifact?
2. Guess at the object's period, use, and value. What clues or details support your guess?
3. What materials were used to make this object?
4. Now learn more about the object by researching it and reading the information in the database.
5. Why was this object created? What function did it serve? By whom was it used? Did its function change over time?
6. What shape does the object have today? What is distinct about it?
7. Where was the object seen? How was it sold, displayed, or bought? How much did it cost when it was first made? What is it worth today? What determines or influences its value?
8. Where does an object get its value? What makes one object very valuable, and another less so? (Possible concepts to explore include the sacred and the marketplace.)



9. What does this object tell you about the beliefs and values of those who used and created it? How is the object a reflection of the time period? What does it tell you about the time period?
10. What additional questions about this object would you like to explore? How could you find answers to these questions?

Activities and Investigations

1. Have students observe the object. Ask them not to interpret what they see, but to take three minutes to free-write anything they observe about it. Then, for another three minutes, have students free-write their interpretations of their observations. How do their interpretations differ from their observations?
2. Research the object's historical context and background. If possible, provide a decade-by-decade history of how that type of object has changed over time in terms of its use; the need for it; and its design, decoration, price, and so on.
3. Like human beings, things can be considered to have lives. The anthropologist Igor Kopytoff has come up with the following guidelines for telling the life story of an object. You can use Kopytoff's ideas as the basis for a thought-provoking small-group or whole-class activity in which students analyze an object from the database or an item of their choice.

In doing the biography of a thing, one would ask questions similar to those one asks about people: What, sociologically, are the biographical possibilities inherent in its 'status' and in the



period and culture, and how are these possibilities realized? Where does the thing come from and who made it? What has been its career so far, and what do people consider to be an ideal career for such things? What are the recognized 'ages' or periods in the thing's 'life,' and what are the cultural markers for them? How does the thing's use change with its age, and what happens when it reaches the end of its usefulness? ...

Biographies of things can make salient what might otherwise remain obscure. For example, in situations of culture contact, they can show what anthropologists have so often stressed: that what is significant about the adoption of alien objects — as of alien ideas — is not the fact that they are adopted but the way they are culturally redefined and put to use. The biography of a car in Africa would reveal a wealth of cultural data: the way it was acquired, how and from whom the money was assembled to pay for it, the relationship of the seller to the buyer, the uses to which the car is regularly put, the identity of its most frequent passengers and of those who borrow it, the frequency of borrowing, the garages to which it is taken and the owner's relation to the mechanics, the movement of the car from hand to hand over the years, and in the end, when the car collapses, the final disposition of its remains. All of these details would reveal an entirely different biography from that of a middle-class American, or Navajo, or French peasant car....

— from "The Cultural Biography of Things: Commoditization as Process" by Igor Kopytoff in *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspectives*, Arjun Appadurai, editor (Cambridge University Press, 1986).

adapted from DOE's Archaeology Kit Workshop adapted from PBS TV's *Antiques Roadshow Teacher's Guide*

http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/roadshow/teachers_intheclassroom.html