

EXPLORING OBJECTS

How many stories can one object tell?



ACTIVITY DESCRIPTION

Students will analyze objects using a variety of disciplinary lenses, including anthropology, history, economics, geography, and art history. Students will then collaborate to explore the role of different social scientists in uncovering the stories objects hold.

If you are planning to use this as part of a visit to The Field Museum, see the field trip guide on page 7.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

The College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework emphasizes the importance of students doing social science just as the social scientists who work at The Field Museum. For an exhibit like the *Cyrus Tang Hall of China*, many different scholars—more than 90 for this project alone—came together to interpret the objects and create a narrative. Sometimes these different disciplinary perspectives overlap, and sometimes they contradict. In the *Hall of China*, most objects have at least three different “stories” in the digital reading rails, and there are endless stories we could have told.

In this activity, students will learn both about China through its objects, and about five different academic fields that rely on collections like the one at The Field Museum to continue research. Students don’t need to bring extensive background knowledge to fully explore this activity, which requires them to observe and ask questions, just as social scientists do.



Image: Pillow, Jin Dynasty (AD 1115-1234), China, probably Hebei Province.
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Keywords: 3-5, 6-8, 9-12, object-based learning, social empathy

Lens: history, economics, art history, anthropology, geography

COMPELLING QUESTIONS

How many stories can one object tell?
How do social scientists find out what they know about objects?
Why are there so many fields in social science?
How do they fit together? Where do they diverge?

OBJECTIVES

Students will construct questions about objects.
Students will analyze objects through a variety of disciplinary lenses.

STANDARDS

C3 Framework

D1.2 Explain points of agreement experts have about interpretations and applications of disciplinary concepts and ideas associated with a compelling question

D1.5 Determine the kinds of sources that will be helpful in answering compelling and supporting questions, taking into consideration multiple points of views represented in the sources

D3.3 Identify evidence that draws information from multiple sources to support claims, noting evidentiary limitations.

D2.His.12 Use questions generated about multiple historical sources to identify further areas of inquiry and additional sources.

Common Core

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.9-10.9 Compare and contrast treatments of the same topic in several primary and secondary sources.

CPS Framework Alignment:

Grade 6, Unit 7: Rise of Asia

Grade 9, Unit 2: The Roots of Humankind

APPROXIMATE TIME

1-2 class periods

PREPARATION NOTES

Students will work in two different groups during this activity. While analyzing objects, they will be split into five groups according to their disciplinary lens (history, anthropology, geography, economics, and art history). When they return to the classroom, they will be in interdisciplinary groups (one representative from each discipline) focusing on a single object

While exploring objects in the museum, students will be working with a graphic organizer and have a half-sheet that describes their discipline. These will need to be prepared in advance.

OTHER MATERIALS

Access to museum content (in exhibit or online exhibition link: <http://chinahall.fieldmuseum.org/>)

“Ask an Artifact” video:

<https://vimeo.com/188169481/3347004c82>

Graphic organizers

Clipboards (in exhibit)

OBJECTS OF FOCUS

This activity will work with any objects, as long as they are rich enough to generate a lot of questions.

Recommended objects from the *Cyrus Tang Hall of China* include:

Ceramic Pillow: http://chinahall.fieldmuseum.org/gallery-5/case-502/g5-2_m2_b6

“Stinkpot”: http://chinahall.fieldmuseum.org/gallery-3/case-304/g3-4_m1_b2

Ink Stone: http://chinahall.fieldmuseum.org/gallery-3/case-307/g3-7_m1_b4

Oracle Bones: http://chinahall.fieldmuseum.org/gallery-2/case-201/g2-1_m2_b1

Spirit Stone: <http://chinahall.fieldmuseum.org/east-garden>

Regional Coins: http://chinahall.fieldmuseum.org/gallery-2/case-204/g2-4_m2_b6

PROCEDURES

› Engage

Share the image of the Leaf-Shaped Ceramic Pillow with students, but do not give away its identity. Explain to students that just in the way we learn about other societies and cultural practices from written records, we also learn from the objects they use.

Ask students, “What do you observe about this object?” Make a public record of their observations on chart paper or another visible classroom space.

Encourage students to focus on observations. Some students may try to jump ahead and guess what the object is or what it is used for, but challenge them to continue making observations. If they state an inference as an observation like, “It could be a plate,” ask them what they observe about it that makes them think it is a plate.

Instead of asking students to guess what the object is, ask students to imagine they are social scientists working for The Field Museum. Social scientists start their investigations with questions. Direct them to generate a list of questions they would ask in order to figure out what the object is. Students can work in groups to generate questions, or questions can be generated through whole class discussion.

› Explore (Questions and Inquiry)

Explain that when it comes to learning about a society, a wide variety of experts look to artifacts to tell different stories.

Give a present day example:

To you your phone is your lifeline for communication. Someone could read a history of your friendship through text messages. To a parent, it is one of many bills they consider when they make different purchases. To the person who made it, this product is their income, one of thousands they see in a day. To the person who designed it, it is a work of art with every detail carefully thought out.

Objects in history are no different, they all tell many stories.

We will be exploring objects through five different perspectives:

- history
- geography
- anthropology
- art history
- economics

Ask students what they already know about these fields. They will get further descriptions in the next part of the activity.

Together, with other subjects like political science, these are grouped as “social sciences” – they study different aspects of humans.

PROCEDURES (CONTINUED)

› Explain (Apply Disciplinary Lens)

Arrange students in five groups, and distribute the disciplinary lens question cards to each group, along with the graphic organizer. Ask each group to read their discipline description and share it out loud to the class in their own words. They will also write a description in their own words on the top of the graphic organizer.

As an example of these different fields, you can share the “Ask an Artifact” video <https://vimeo.com/188169481/3347004c82> with students. In this video, Field archeologist Lisa Niziolek talks about the different disciplinary lenses she uses to explore objects.

Return to the list of disciplinary questions generated for the Leaf-Shaped Ceramic Pillow, and prompt each group to ask a question that someone in their discipline would ask. Examples of those questions are on their disciplinary lens question cards. After they pose a question, ask students what tentative conclusion or inference they would make. This is the same process they will be going through in the exhibit or with images included below or in the online exhibition – making observations, asking questions according to their discipline, and then drawing tentative conclusions.

› Elaborate (Gather and Evaluate Evidence)

Working in groups, students will explore objects in the *Cyrus Tang Hall of China*.

Objects can be explored in one of three ways:

- Visiting the museum in person;
- Using the online exhibition: <http://chinahall.fieldmuseum.org/>

Select enough objects for each student in the group. For example, if students are in groups of five, select five objects. They will look at all of the objects together, but in the final activity they will each represent one of the objects to a different group. Each group can use the same set of images.

Direct students to use the content in the digital rails in the Museum or in the online exhibition content to add to their findings. Note that they should make their own observations and ask their questions first.

› Evaluate (Develop Claims, Communicate and Critique Conclusions)

After they make object observations, direct students to jigsaw, joining a new group of students who have the same object as they do. There should be one member of each discipline group in every object group. Each member will have different questions and thoughts about the same object.

Direct students to share their observations, questions, and conclusions with each other, and then answer the following questions.

- What did the disciplines have in common? How are they different?
- Why are the different disciplinary lenses important?
- Which lenses interest you the most? Why?

After students discuss the similarities and differences in groups, they can respond individually to the discussion questions from their own perspective.

- What did the disciplines have in common? How are they different?
- Why are the different disciplinary lenses important?
- What might we miss if we only had one lens?

ENRICHING THE LESSON

Background Knowledge Needed:

Introductory knowledge about China would be helpful, but is not required. This activity will enable students to explore the objects without having to know a lot about them. Background knowledge will help them in drawing conclusions.

Anticipated Misconceptions:

Students may think that all research is done by historians or scientists.

Anthropology and archaeology are easy terms to confuse. You can explain that archaeology is part of anthropology.

Methods to Build Empathy:

Social empathy

Students will engage in group work and discussion. Both will foster active listening and building upon others' ideas.

Opportunities for Informed Action and Contemporary Connections:

This activity begins to prepare students for work in these fields, which expand knowledge and challenge misconceptions.

Students could take one of these lenses to explore factors in their school or community.

DIFFERENTIATION

Extensions

For an additional challenge, have students read "Signals from the Past," the introduction to *A History of the World in 100 Objects*. While reading, discuss the advantages and shortcomings of object-based history telling.

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

[A History of the World in 100 Objects](#) by Neil MacGregor

"[Rise of the West & Historical Methodology](#)," Crash Course: World History:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nosJVTuCHFk&index=12&list=PL8dPuuaLjXtNjasccI-WaipONGX3zoY4M>

explores the subjectivity of history and the way history is written.

[The Mystery of the Headless Romans](#):

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4rhLizmUTkc>

shows how a variety of social scientists collaborate to solve ancient mysteries.

LESSON GLOSSARY

These concepts are embedded in the museum content and may be unfamiliar to students.

social science – the field of study dealing with an aspect of society, including anthropology, economics, and civics

discipline – an academic field of study - as an example, interdisciplinary means across different subjects.

NOTES FOR FIELD TRIP PLANNING

Before

The “Engage,” “Explore,” and “Explain” sections of the lesson plan can be used as a pre-visit activity. Have students generate a list of questions and assign students to disciplinary groups to join in the museum. You may wish to show students how the interactive reading rails work using the online exhibition: <http://chinahall.fieldmuseum.org/> as an example.

During

While in the museum, students can do the object research described in “Elaborate” throughout the exhibition. You may wish to share images of the objects with students beforehand so they can locate them more easily. Students can carry their disciplinary lens half sheet with them while they in the exhibit to help prompt questions and discussions with their peers.

After

After the exhibit, students will work with their object groups to analyze their common findings in the museum and have the group discussion described in the “Evaluate” section of the lesson.

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historian

An expert in or student of history, especially that of a particular period, geographical region, or social phenomenon: for example, a military historian

Though historians use a variety of source material, much of history is typically defined by written records. We call time before writing prehistoric times.

A Historian might ask...

How does this compare to objects from other times?

What did people at the time write about this object?



Who used this object? What were their lives like?

What impact did this object have on society/daily lives?

What do earlier objects teach us about the development of this object?

What objects today are used for similar functions? How were those objects developed?



anthropologist

An expert or student of anthropology focuses on the study of humankind, in particular, and the comparative study of human societies and cultures and their development.

An Anthropologist might ask...

How was this object used?



How does it compare to objects from other cultures?

How did humans interact when using this artifact?

What human concern does this object answer?

What cultural value does this object have?

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economist

An expert in or student of economics focuses on the production, consumption, and transfer of goods and services within and across social systems.

An Economist might ask:

What materials is this made of?

Where did the materials come from?

What was the exchange value of this object?

How was this used?



What other objects are related to this object?

What role did this object have in exchange? How/where/by whom was it traded?

What was the demand for this object?

What role did rulers play in the production, consumption, or transfer of this object?



art historian

An expert or student of anthropology focuses on the study of humankind, in particular, and the comparative study of human societies and cultures and their development.

An Art Historian might ask:

What is represented in this object? Are there symbols? Representations? Graphics of any kind?



What is the object made from? How was it made? Did the creators need any particular skills to make this object?

Why was this created?

How does its design fit into its function? What elements are meant for design? What for function?

What objects are similar in design/function?

How does the design of this object relate to other objects of the time?

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geographer

An expert in the study of the physical features of the earth and its atmosphere and of human activity as it affects and is affected by these.

A Geographer might ask:

Where was this made?



What natural resources were used to make this? Where did they come from?

What patterns exist with similar objects across places and spaces?

How did people use this object to interact with their natural environment?



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Graphic Organizer

My disciplinary lens is: (circle one) History Economics Art History Geography Anthropology

Object	Observations	Questions	Tentative Conclusions

STUDENT HANDOUT

Why is this lens important?

EXPLORING OBJECTS

How many stories can one object tell?



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EXPLORANDO OBJETOS

¿Cuántas historias puede contar un objeto?



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