

## OBJECT HISTORY ASSIGNMENT

Many objects arrived at the Museum after living a full "life" out in the world – plates were eaten off of, clothes were worn, and musical instruments played – and their current status as museum artifact is only the latest stage in their existence. A single object may have even held a number of different statuses, meanings, and purposes that changed over time depending on context: a good to be bought or sold at market, a valuable status symbol to be displayed, a family heirloom to be treasured, a sacred item used in worship, or a symbol of peace traded in diplomatic relations.

While some object's histories are longer or more unusual than others, every object has a history and to best understand the object, we must consider its whole history, rather than seeing it only at a single moment in time. The history of an object can be written up as a sort of "biography" to document its existence, from its creation to the present, taking into consideration how its meaning, status, or purpose may have changed over time.

This assignment is a project for students to research an object from the collection and write its object biography. In tandem with the visit to the classroom, we encourage students to schedule visits to the Museum Archives and to utilize the Museum Library to help complete the assignment.

### 1. Getting Started

- Select one object from the list of objects provided.

### 2. Initial Information Gathering

- What information is available in the object record on the collections website?
  - General: date, culture, material, size, etc.
  - Does it have a bibliography?
- What information is not there that you would like to know?

### 3. Typological Research

- Research your object's type broadly, e.g., cylinder seals or lime containers.
  - What is its purpose? How does it work? Do they only appear in certain geographic areas or specific eras?
- Focus in on your object's type in the relevant geographic location and specific time, e.g., bronze mirrors from Etruria in the 4th Century BCE.
  - Note that while for some objects you can only do this to a certain degree, others can get incredibly specific.
  - This information will be helpful for answering questions later in the assignment, when certain answers are not readily available. In these cases, you can draw upon your object's type as a whole to make comparisons and educated guesses, e.g., while we do not know where this particular statue was displayed, similar ones have most often been found in the gardens of the wealthy.

### 4. Object Visit at the Museum

- Get acquainted with your object: are there any details that you didn't notice from the online photos? are there any physical qualities that are best experienced in person? does it have a physical presence worth noting - whether that be that it is large and impressive or small and personal?

- Background Check: does all of the information you have about your specific object check out? e.g., do you see the repair that was mentioned in the record? is the inscription as clear as the transcription suggests or do you think there might be room for error? can you see all the details that the record states are there?
  - Remember that while scholarship does build upon the work of those who came before us, we need to not take anything for granted. Errors and misinterpretations will continue to be repeated until someone takes note!
- Does seeing the object in person pique any new questions or lines of inquiry?

### 5. Researching Your Object's Origins

- Where was your object made? Depending on the object, this might be general (e.g., Egypt) or more specific (e.g., Attica, Greece)
  - How do you know this? In some cases we can tell specifically from certain features; in others, we have to speculate based on type.
  - Remember, this is not where it was found, but rather where it was created. Some objects are created far away from their intended users, whether it was because they were created for an export market or because the necessary raw materials or necessary skill sets were only found elsewhere.
- Do we know who made this object? Was it an unnamed craftsman or a specific individual?
  - If it was a specific person, what do we know about them?
  - If it was an unnamed craftsman, why do we not know their identity? Was it not important to know the name of the maker or was it lost to time or both?
- What kind of specialized knowledge would have been necessary to create your object?
  - Would there be any specific markings left behind from its creation? (e.g., chisel marks, mold lines, hammer marks)
- Did the materials that were used to create your object come from the same place it was made?
- How do we know how old your object is?
  - Do we have a general idea of how old your object is or do we know the exact age of your object? How do we know what we know?
  - Note: Dating objects can be extremely complicated with many factors that affect what we can test or look for to date an object, including: what it is, what it is made of, where it was found, what it was found with, how it was made, what decoration or writing is on it, written evidence referring to it, photographic evidence documenting it, damage or weathering, how old it is, and more. Not all techniques can be applied to all objects and not all techniques give the same kind of results. Some can give us *absolute dates* (i.e. pinpoint how many years before the present day - e.g. radiocarbon dating) while others can only give us *relative dates* (i.e. the age of the object is in relation to another thing - e.g. older than, about the same time as, etc.).
- Was your object made for a specific person or group of people?
  - Do we know how much influence they had on the creation of your object?

### 6. Tracking The Use Life of Your Object

- From the creation of the object to its arrival at the Museum, track the various phases your object went through on this journey.
  - For some objects, this will be a much shorter journey, while for others it will be much longer.
  - For each stage, from creator to the Museum, you should ask the following questions:
    - How was it acquired? How did it move from one stage to the next?

- Who would have used it?
  - How would those using your object perceive it? Was it valuable or utilitarian? Was it unique or commonplace?
- How was it used? Did it serve a single purpose or was did it have a more general use?
  - Are there any markings from its use that might be left on the object? (e.g., burn marks on lamps or wear marks on fabric)
- When and where was it used?
- At what point would your object have moved from one phase of its journey to the next? e.g., it was considered unfashionable, it broke, it was lost, it was seen to have served its purpose, it was no longer needed, etc.
  - Are there any signs of repair?
  - How would the user feel about getting rid of the object?
- Note: Some objects lived long lives doing the same thing, but sometimes by different people (e.g. pipe stem passed down through the family, a venerated statue of a deity in a temple, or a coin that continued to be currency).
  - How would the user's attitude toward the object have changed over time? (e.g. seen as an heirloom, valued less due to inflation, special due to its antiquity)
- Note: Some objects changed purpose, were used in a different place or by different people, or were altered in some way that changed them (e.g. inscribed marble headstone was reused as construction material or ancient gemstone reset in 17th Century jewelry)
  - How did the new users feel about this object in its new setting?
  - How did the old users, if around, feel about these changes?

## 7. Provenance Research

- When did the object come to the Penn Museum?
- How was it acquired?
  - See the Credit Line field in the object's record on the collections webpage
  - What other items were acquired with it?
- Has your object been published or used for research? If so, how?

## 8. Summary