

World of Things - Spring 2019
Object Biography
Researched Essay: Track 1

This track for your final project asks you to bring together skills of object analysis you have developed over the course of the semester with research. The premise of the project is that objects, like people, move through space and time.

A great example of an object biography is this 25 minute Ted Talk by Neil MacGregor of the British Museum:
http://www.ted.com/talks/neil_macgregor_2600_years_of_history_in_one_object

This assignment asks you to develop a biography of an object from a local collection, using lecture notes (for concepts), museum/library records (for current interpretation), and your annotated bibliography (for context) as a foundation.

You may present the object biography in a number of different formats

- a paper of no less than 6 pages
- a research poster (I can offer models)
- a multimedia presentation (12-20mn if continuous, of comparable depth and breadth if its more interactive, like a google earth tour or prezi)

Your biography should be cohesive and clear and should include information about the following:

1. What is it?

Analysis of material objects requires careful observation. When scholars analyze material objects, they begin by recording basic “facts”: size, material, distinguishing features, ornamentation, etc. This kind of information will provide material for you to generalize about the technology, economy, and social relations of the community that produced the object. The material of the object may make it possible to specify where it was produced, especially if we have other evidence about centers of production.

2. Where is it now and how did it get there?

The biography of an object includes information about the owners of an object over an extended period of time. This information may reveal how the object was used or perceived in different settings, perhaps in ways unintended by its creator. An object produced for practical function in daily life may acquire symbolic value at a later time. Or, an object’s original function may become irrelevant because its owners have no use for it or because people no longer know how the object was originally used. Most objects have passed through several historical stages and the location of discovery is rarely the site of production.

Ask yourself these questions: How did the object reach its location of discovery? What does its find or acquisition context tell us about the object's environment and associations? Are there any identifying marks on the object: a date, a location, a creator's name, inscribed words? What about later collecting contexts? If you can't trace your specific object, are there others like it whose trajectory could give you insight?

3. What is the object's function?

Objects may have more than one function, some more obvious than others. The primary function of an object is that for which it was originally made and used. Additional uses, however, may have been invented. When meeting a new object, we often try to establish its function based on our own experiences, and often such analogies are accurate. Do not be misled, however! The function of coins may seem obvious: they are used in financial transactions. Coins, however, may also have symbolic value connected with identity, lordship, status, etc. Sometimes clues about usage are found in the coins themselves (for example, a hole at the top can indicate that it was worn on a necklace).

Close observation of an object and its context can help establish function. Look for wear patterns to indicate how something was used. Looking at multiple examples of the same object can help determine "normal" use.

4. Who made, owned, or used the object?

Interpreting the production and use of an object can be controversial. Primary and secondary sources will be helpful to you as you evaluate your object. If you have encountered disagreements, recent evidence, or paradigm shifts in your research, make sure to note them in your biography. Consider the economic and social systems that produced the object. What trade systems and technologies were necessary to make it? Did it have ceremonial, decorative, and/or practical use? What do the decorative elements and/or function of the object reveal about the politics, religion, and social dynamics of the culture that made, owned or used it?

The following is a list of possible components, to be customized according to the proposed project in consultation with the instructor and submitted as a final portfolio: Please confer with me no later than February 15

- Project proposal and timeline for completion.
- Scholarly bibliography, annotated.
- Account of the object's life in written or multimedia form