



What is Material Culture?

Lesson Plan

Grade Levels: Elementary, Middle and High School

National Social Studies Themes: Culture; Time, Continuity and Change

Pennsylvania Standards: PA Academic Standards for History: 8.1, 8.2, 8.4
PA Academic Standards for ELA: 1.5 Speaking and Listening

Big Idea: Material Culture is the study of objects or belongings of human beings.

Essential Question: How does the study of artifacts help historians learn about the past?

Objectives:

- Students will understand that artifacts provide information about people, places and events in time.
- Students will make predictions based on observations of artifacts.

Time Frame: 1-2 class periods, based on individual school schedules and learning objectives.

Materials Needed:

- [Material Culture PowerPoint](#)
- [Artifact Analysis Worksheet](#)
- Pencils
- Magnifying glasses – optional, one/student or one/group

- Photos of The Hershey Story Museum artifacts - enough for students to work in groups of 3-4 and for each group to have a different artifact. It would also be possible to have multiple groups looking at the same artifact, to generate discussion about different interpretations of each object. Use the photos in the PowerPoint. Note: If using copies of the slides, be sure not to print the notes at the bottom of each slide.

Lesson Plan:

Day 1:

Background content for teacher

Introduction to material culture:

What is material culture? Material culture is the study of objects or belongings of human beings. Just about anything you can see, feel or touch that is not human has the potential to be an item of material culture. Clothing, utensils like forks and spoons, cars, a soda can, toys, artwork, buildings, computers – are all examples.

Why do we study material culture? Studying the physical objects of a culture gives us a better understanding and appreciation for the complex lives of the people who interacted with those objects. It provides us insight into their ideas, beliefs, habits and values. The objects we surround ourselves with everyday help to tell who we are and how we live.

What is an artifact? Solicit ideas from students.

Definition of an artifact: An object made by a human being, typically an item of historical or cultural interest.

Show some examples of artifacts: school supplies, written material, athletic apparel, musical instruments, etc. What do these artifacts tell us about the people who made and used/use them? Why might the study of artifacts be important to historians?

Students are going to become historians and will follow the steps that historians take to learn about artifacts.

Content for elementary students:

Historians follow a set of steps or procedures to learn about an artifact:

- Close observation of the artifact to determine:
 - What materials were used to make the artifact?
 - What are the qualities of the artifact? Shape, size, color, etc.
 - Are there any words, dates, symbols on the artifact?
- Ask questions about the artifact, such as what purpose did the artifact serve? Who made it? Who might have used it? Do we still use it today?

- Draw conclusions and make interpretations about the artifact: What can we learn about technology of the time? What can we determine about the people who made and used the artifact? How does the artifact compare to an object today that fulfills the same or a similar purpose?

Content for middle and high school students:

From the National Council on Public History:

<https://ncph.org/what-is-public-history/how-historians-work/>

“Professional historians—people with some advanced training in the discipline of history—bring a particular and often-misunderstood set of skills to the task of learning about the past. They gather and weigh different kinds of evidence, including primary sources (documents or recollections from the time period being studied), material artifacts, and previous scholarship (secondary sources). Using these sources, they work toward careful, often provisional interpretations of what was happening and why at a given time.

Above all, **historians are trying to understand how and why things change over time**. This isn’t a matter of simply pinpointing causes and outcomes, but of considering different contexts and time scales for interpreting the available facts.

For example, the history of conflict in the Middle East is often seen as the result of religious clashes going back centuries or millennia. But it can also be interpreted in light of the history of European intervention and colonization in the region, as well as the shorter timeline of other nations’ reliance on Middle Eastern oil.

Historians weigh these kinds of time frames and intersecting processes to arrive at accounts of the past that go beyond simple cause and effect. **Good historical thinking seldom provides easy answers or lessons**. But it can help to clarify what’s at stake, what has shaped present-day realities, and who has been involved in (or excluded from) particular struggles and changes.”

Lesson:

Project the [PowerPoint presentation](#). Show only slides 1,2,3 and 4.

Invite students to look carefully at the artifact. [Complete the worksheet](#).

At the conclusion of the lesson, students will share their questions, inferences and predictions with either small groups or as a whole class.

To expand the thinking of middle and high school students, Thinking Routines from Project Zero, Harvard Graduate School of Education, can be used to examine the artifact.

[The Explanation Game](#)

[See, Wonder, Connect x2](#)

[What Makes You Say That?](#)

Day 2:

Prior to the lesson, divide students into groups of 3-4. Each group will need a magnifying glass, a photo of one of the artifacts from the PowerPoint (Slides 5-10) and a copy of an Artifact Analysis Sheet* - see links to choices below, or use the [Artifact Analysis worksheet](#) from the Hershey Story Museum

[Analyze an Artifact - Primary Grades](#)

[Analyze an Artifact - Español - Primary](#)

[Analyze an Artifact - Intermediate/Middle Grades](#)

[Analyze an Artifact - Español - Intermediate/Middle](#)

[Analyze an Artifact - High School](#)

*These Analysis Sheets are from the National Archives.

Another option for an analysis tool:

[Library of Congress Primary Source Analysis Tools](#)

Review definition of an artifact by asking students to offer examples of artifacts.

As historians, students will be trying to identify artifacts that belong to the Hershey Story Museum. They will work collaboratively to examine their group's artifact photo and then complete the Artifact Analysis Worksheet.

To conclude the class, each group will present their artifact and explain their analysis. The teacher can project each artifact, as the group explains their conclusions. Students must be able to point to evidence in the photo to support their claim(s). For a literacy activity, each student writes a paragraph describing their artifact and telling its story: who created it, how, why, when?

What do each of these artifacts tell us about the people who lived and worked in Hershey?

What do the objects tell us about the community of Hershey?

Assessment:

Teacher observation of the small group conversations as students examine their artifact and complete the Artifact Analysis Sheet.

Enrichment Activity:

Now it is your turn to become a museum curator and educator. Have everyone in your family go around your house and each pick 5-10 items that are important in your life and you think helps explain who you are. This could be anything from stuffed animals, flowers, art, clothing, toys, salt and pepper shakers anything! Then create your own museum by having each member display their items with some information about where and when they got each item. Give your museum a name and have each member do a guided tour of their items for the rest of the family. Maybe you will learn something new and get a better understanding of your family and what makes each of you special. Afterwards write down the stories and importance of each item so you have this information to share for generations. Everybody has an interesting life story to tell. How will the objects in your life tell that story?