

Assignment #2:
Object Biography: DUE DATE

Each object has a story to tell, one that is shaped by human use. As we will learn in this course, all objects have a life (or a series of lives). Using objects as evidence is a challenging proposition, but this assignment will help you develop the skills and strategies you need to approach material culture from a critical perspective.

This paper assignment asks you to write a biography of one object in Harvard's collections, using lecture notes, museum/library records, and your annotated bibliography (see assignment #1) as a foundation.

In a 3-4 page paper, answer the following questions:

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.

In section, you will encounter a number of medieval artifacts in the Harvard museum. During your visit, you will take notes about the appearance, function, use, and context of the objects. Use these notes as a starting-point for this section of your paper.

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?

The Museum staff and vertical files can help you answer these questions.

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 it?

For examples of object biographies, explore:

- [The Pitt Rivers Founding Collection](#)
- [The Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History](#)
- [Khan Academy Videos](#)
- [A History of the World in 100 Objects \(The British Museum/BBC\)](#)
- Roberta J. M. Olsen, Patricia L. Reilly, & Rupert Shepherd, eds., “The Biography of the Object in Medieval and Renaissance Italy,” Special issue, *Renaissance Studies* 19, no. 5