

Minds in Motion

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An Object Lesson

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Before visitors, especially students, can be expected to “read” museum objects on a tour, they should be given an example for practice. Whether during a pre-touring visit to a classroom, or as an introduction before entering the galleries, docents can conduct a simple “object lesson” as preparation.

Using ajar of apple pie filling as the object to be “read,” let’s consider and answer the following six questions:

1. What is the object?
2. For what purpose was it intended?
3. Who might have made, owned, used, or kept it?
4. What activities are associated with this object?
5. How does this object represent change?
6. How do you feel about those changes; and why do you feel that way?

The answers to these questions can quickly expand the meaning of this fairly mundane object.

1. The object is a glass jar with a paper label and painted steel lid, containing 32 ounces of prepared, apple pie filling.
2. The contents are intended to be baked into a pie and eaten. The container is meant to be thrown away or recycled. The filling was prepared in advance as a convenience; to make a time consuming/ labor intensive activity, fast and easy to accomplish. It also allows people to enjoy apples in their pie regardless of the season.

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3. Those who produced, marketed, used, and disposed of this jar may include: farmers and orchard managers; seasonal labor for harvesting; factory workers and supervisors for preparing and packaging; corporate buyers; growers of sugar cane; sugar processors; spice importers; label designers; advertisers; printers; iron ore miners; steel plant workers; workers in glass factories and bottling plants; truckers and shippers; grocery store buyers, shelf stockers, and checkers; consumers; cooks; diners; garbage haulers; landfill operators; and recyclers.
4. Activities associated with this object could be as diverse as: hiring; working; firing; cooperating; competing; selling; buying; planning or failing to plan; cooking; cleaning; dining; conversing; and keeping or breaking resolutions about eating sweets. Some symbolic activities associated with this object are: patriotism (“as American as apple pie”); wholesomeness; and traditionalism.
5. The way we get and use apples for pie has changed significantly over the years. During earlier times, apples were grown and sold locally, while in season, for use by neighboring customers who made their pies “from scratch.” Today, large scale growers, mass production, rapid transport, technology, and marketing make fresh fruit available year-round, and provide time-saving, prepared pie filling for consumption. The make-up and pattern of consumption has also changed. More people live on their own as singles; and many family cooks have responsibilities outside the home, have little time to prepare meals, and may not be mothers or wives with support or assistance from partners.
6. A wide variety of feelings may be associated with these changes. Everyone should be encourage to express opinions and to offer reasons for their point-of-view.

All of these questions, and their responses, offer docents an avenue for further discussion about the object, the culture, the time period, and so forth. The purpose of this activity is to acquaint visitors with the process of reading, interpreting, and constructing meaning from objects, and to demonstrate that even the simplest objects can offer insights into the people and time associated with it. (This exercise was adapted from “Interpreting History through Objects” by Barbara G. Carson, *The Journal of Museum Education: Roundtable Reports*, Vol. 10, No. 3, pp. 2-5.) Most historical objects can also be considered using this approach. Try applying the same questions asked about the apple pie filling to the buttonhook pictured above.

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These questions should lead to discussions about use and obsolescence. They might even have you imagining a dialogue between a parent buttoning a child's shoes while the child hurries out to play. Perhaps you might wonder about the status and cost of buttonhooks; which type might have been given away with a new pair of shoes, and which might have been purchased as a more decorative item?

No matter what objects or phenomena a tour presents, pre-tour practice in object reading and interpretation prepares visitors for the content of the tour, equips them with important skills for participation, and helps them make personal sense out of museum collections.

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