

NAME



MATERIAL CULTURE ANALYSIS is the study of objects and consumerism, and the ways in which objects prescribe behavior.

Sketch your object and annotate deductions from your direct observations. **1. Take some time to observe the object without judgment: What do you see in the object? Describe everything you can about it - content, imagery, text, style, scale, materials, and craftsmanship. 2. Analyze the object: Who created the object? For what purpose(s) was it created? For whom? What can you infer from the object about its intended use and how consumers have used it? Think about the relationship between inscribed/prescribed design dynamics. 3. How do you make sense of this object's testimony in relation to other found evidence or prior knowledge you have?**

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| <p>OBJECT sketch</p> | |
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In-depth OBSERVATION:

1. Study the object. What do you see? What questions come up after you've examined the artifact?
2. Guess at the object's period, use, and value. What clues or details support your guess?
3. What materials were used to make this object?
4. Now learn more about the object by researching it and watching an ANTIQUES ROADSHOW appraisal about it, or similar items, if available. Who made the piece? When, where, and how? Was this object created by someone famous or by an unknown craftsman?
5. Why was this object created? What function did it serve? By whom was it used? Did its function change over time?
6. What shape does the object have today? What is distinct about it?
7. Where was the object seen? How was it sold, displayed, or bought? How much did it cost when it was first made? What is it worth today? What determines or influences its value? (For more information exploring the value of an object, see the article "What's the Value?" on this site.)
8. Where does an object get its value? What makes one object very valuable, and another less so? (Possible concepts to explore include supply and demand, and the marketplace.)
9. What does this object tell you about the beliefs and values of those who used and created it? How is the object a reflection of the time period? What does it tell you about the time period?
10. What additional questions about this object would you like to explore? How could you find answers to these questions?

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Write a biography of your object based on background research.

In doing the *biography of a thing*, one would ask questions similar to those one asks about people: What, sociologically, are the biographical possibilities inherent in its 'status' and in the period and culture, and how are these possibilities realized? Where does the thing come from and who made it? What has been its career so far, and what do people consider to be an ideal career for such things? What are the recognized 'ages' or periods in the thing's 'life,' and what are the cultural markers for them? How does the thing's use change with its age, and what happens when it reaches the end of its usefulness? **Biographies of things can make salient what might otherwise remain obscure.** For example, in situations of culture contact, they can show what anthropologists have so often stressed: that what is significant about the adoption of alien objects – as of alien ideas – is not the fact that they are adopted but the way they are culturally

redefined and put to use. The biography of a car in Africa would reveal a wealth of cultural data: the way it was acquired, how and from whom the money was assembled to pay for it, the relationship of the seller to the buyer, the uses to which the car is regularly put, the identity of its most frequent passengers and of those who borrow it, the frequency of borrowing, the garages to which it is taken and the owner's relation to the mechanics, the movement of the car from hand to hand over the years, and in the end, when the car collapses, the final disposition of its remains. All of these details would reveal an entirely different biography from that of a middle-class American, or Navajo, or French peasant car....

– from *"The Cultural Biography of Things: Commoditization as Process"* by Igor Kopytoff in *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspectives*, Arjun Appadurai, editor (Cambridge University Press, 1986).

Biography of an Object