

DARMMUSEUM

Lessons from the American Home
Object Lesson: The Container
Suitable for 4th-12th grades

Summary:

Students will replicate the “object lesson” from the 1860’s, in which they “close read” (or close look) an object to try to capture and describe as many of its physical properties as possible. Then they will determine its function and use, compare it to other objects like it, and finally, they will reason out its historic value. After trying to reason out this object through observable data alone, they will be given secondary sources that reveal the history and context of the object. They will then re-evaluate their observations and reflect on the relationship between secondary and primary sources, while evaluating the benefits of material history.

Learning Objectives:

- Students will practice observation and descriptive language as applied to material history
- Students will understand the relationship between objects and documentary sources
- Students will be familiar with issues around historical hygiene (ooooo foreshadowing)

Time: <15 minutes Required Materials: All required materials are included in this packet.

Curriculum Timing Suggestion: this lesson deals with one of the biggest crises that resulted from urbanization. Fits well with discussions of the industrial revolution, gilded age, or the early twentieth century. Can also be used as an example during Unit 0 of sources or during any discussion of primary and secondary sources.

Skills, Sources, and Concepts	Examples
Compelling and Supporting Questions	What data can we retrieve from historic objects from observation alone? How do secondary sources contextualize primary objects? How can we use material history to augment our understanding of the past? How can material history research be used to develop historical arguments? How did hygiene practices develop? How did those developments affect issues of class, health, and gender?
Sources/Evidence	Historic objects, secondary sources, museum databases, corporate/organizational history
Key Concepts	Health and hygiene, urbanization, industrialization, material history
Key Strategies and Skills	Critical reading and thinking, close reading objects, evaluating primary and secondary sources, synthesizing information between primary materials and secondary sources
Evidence-Backed Interpretations	Using secondary sources to contextualize material history, using secondary sources to make claims and arguments about historical objects, using primary materials to make arguments about secondary sources
Action and Communication	Students will become informed and critical consumers of material history, students will hone strong descriptive language, students will practice analysis and exercise reasoned reflection

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Object Lesson: The Container – Teacher Copy, student copy begins on page 9

Close Reading: Look at the object from the DAR Museum collection below. Write down words or phrases to describe it completely to someone who has not seen it. Do not just label it. What shape is it? What are the shapes contained within it? What colors does it have and where are they? Describe any images or words you see – what do they depict, what font and color does it use? What materials do you think it is made of? What size is it? What would it feel like if you touched it? Does it make a sound? Try not to stop writing until time timer is up.



Observe:

[Have students note the distinctive coloring and patterns. How would that be produced? What do the shapes and tones remind you of? Describe the handle, the lid. How big do they think it is? What is it made of?]

Reasoning – Function and Function Qualities: What is this object used for? Do you know or do you think it is used for that purpose? Make sure to distinguish between *assumed knowledge* and *reasoned conclusions*. What physical aspects of this object determine how it is used? What makes it able to do the thing that you think it does?

[Clearly this is a container. What would it contain? Why would it need handle? Why does it have a lid? Could it safely contain liquids? Why might it need to be transported? Could its design reflect its function in some way (like having a picture of a cookie on a cookie jar)? It's hard to determine size. What function might it have if it could fit in you palm? What if it was as big as your head? What if you could wrap your arms around it? Which size seems most likely based on its other attributes (why would you only have one handle on something big or heavy enough to need two hands)?]

Reasoning: Compare this object to other objects like it. How is it different? How is it the same? In what circumstances would their differences be more beneficial? How could this object be improved to suit different scenarios?

[Let's think about other containers and objects contained within them. How does this compare to a regular mug? How does it compare to a Tupperware container? How about a pot or a crock pot? Think about containers for foodstuffs, dry goods, or seasonings? How would the qualities of this container make it more suitable for some things over others?]

Synthesis, Part 1 - Read: Read the secondary source(s) below.

Source 1: DAR Museum Catalogue Record #84.8.70 A & B, Chamber pot with cover, 21 May 1985

Date: ca. 1870 Origin: Probably East Liverpool, Ohio Maker: Possibly McNichol, Burton and Co. or Vodrey Bros

Yellow-ware chamber pot with lid. Pot has strap handle on bulbous shape with 1 inch lipped rim.... Throughout the cream-colored band there are six feathery motifs in an olive-green color that resemble the “tea stains” of mocha ware. These decorations are not a typical “tree” but closer to a seaweed pattern.

Lid: Probably not part of original. See attached letter from K.A.G. Raybould, English Ceramics Circle. Color of the yellow clay differs from pot and lid does not fit well...Detail not as well executed as pot and colors differ.

Source 2: “Chamber Pot,” The Britannica Dictionary, 2022

Noun: a container that is kept in a bedroom and that is used as a toilet

Source 3: Peter C. Baldwin, “Public Privacy: Restrooms in American Cities, 1869-1932,” *Journal of Social History* (Winter 2014)

Concerns about public sanitation motivated early efforts to install public toilets. The sight and smell of bodily waste were obtrusive facts of life in nineteenth century cities, especially for poorer people. Before indoor plumbing, affluent Americans visited free-standing privies in their backyards, or had servants dump chamber pots there. Poorer people in tenements used communal privies. Some of the poorest had no privies at all and simply emptied slops into the gutter or threw them out the window in the alleyway or street. None of these activities in a rural setting would be so visible or so likely to affect others, but they occurred in growing, dense, chaotic cities. Streets already reeked from horse manure and urine that pooled in cobblestone crevices and soaked into wooden paving. The stench of feces and rotting garbage was nauseating even by the relaxed standards of the time.

People had lower needs for bodily privacy than we might expect today. In the early nineteenth century, two-seat privies could be found even at single-family houses. Women as well as men relieved themselves in view of strangers of the same sex, as the British actress Fanny Kemble found to her visit to a beach resort. Men enjoyed telling and playing jokes involving privies, chamber pots and public urination. City men urinated in alleys or on the sides of buildings... The filth and indecency of the street was in stark contrast to the refinement that affluent Americans were learning to value in their persons and their homes. The nineteenth-century, urban middle class increasingly viewed all forms of bodily restraint as essential to respectability.

Source 4: Carrie Blough, Registrar/Assistant Curator DAR Museum, 26 April 2022

“It still smells. It straight up smells like pee.”

Synthesis, Part 2 – Reflect (<3 minutes): How did the secondary sources change how you viewed the object? Cite specific examples. Are these sources reliable? Look back at your observations – what did you observe accurately, what did you miss or observe inaccurately? Look at your reasoned function and comparisons. Has your concept of the object’s function changed? How does wealth affect individuals’ hygiene? How are hygiene practices different between genders? How does this information change your imagination of the past? In what ways will this affect how you look at future objects? What questions do you still have? Where would you go to find answers to those questions.

[Remind the students that indoor plumbing only begins to spread in the 1840s. It took until the 1870s or 1860s to have widespread sewage systems in major cities. The modern “s-bend/u-bend” toilet was invented by, seriously, Thomas Crapper in 1880. Middle Class Americans largely had flushing indoor plumbing by the start of the 20th century, but poorer and rural Americans were still using outhouses up to the 1950s. When you have to trudge across the yard in winter to pee in the middle of the night, it might make more sense to keep a little pot by the bed instead. The final source looks at the crisis of public bathrooms at the end of the 19th century. Sophistication of hygiene created even more stark divides between wealth and poverty. Even the very concept of privacy is a largely modern notion that comes about during and after the invention of private flushing toilets. Does hygiene still act as a signifier of class in the present?]

Additional Reflection Space:

A large, empty rectangular box with a thin black border, intended for student reflection. It occupies the majority of the page below the text.

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Reasoning – Function and Function Qualities: What is this object used for? Do you know or do you think it is used for that purpose? Make sure to distinguish between *assumed knowledge* and *reasoned conclusions*. What physical aspects of this object determine how it is used? What makes it able to do the thing that you think it does?

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Reasoning: Compare this object to other objects like it. How is it different? How is it the same? In what circumstances would their differences be more beneficial? How could this object be improved to suit different scenarios?



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