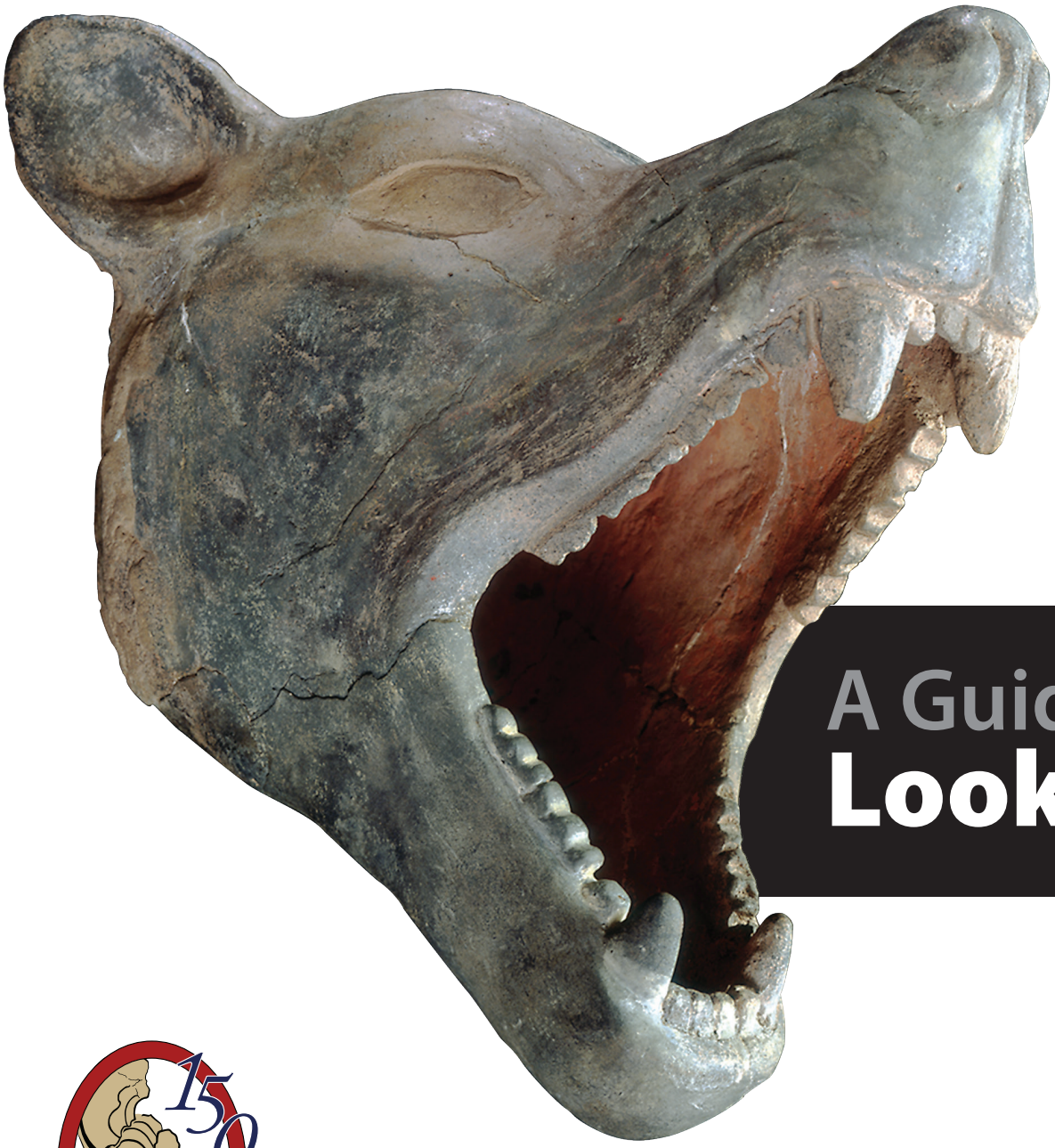


A Guide to Looking

Peabody Museum of Archaeology & Ethnology
Harvard University
150

Researching Objects *at the* Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology

From the Department of Academic Partnerships

Introduction

Museum collections are primary sources, offering first-hand testimony from peoples and places in various moments of time. The information they provide affords us insights into the cultures or people who variously made, owned, preserved, and interpreted them.

The Peabody Museum houses more than 1.2 million individual objects, including archaeological, ethnological, and osteological collections, as well as 500,000 photographic images, and substantial archival records.

This guide will help you get started with your object research at the Peabody Museum, and is intended for use with archaeological and ethnological collections.

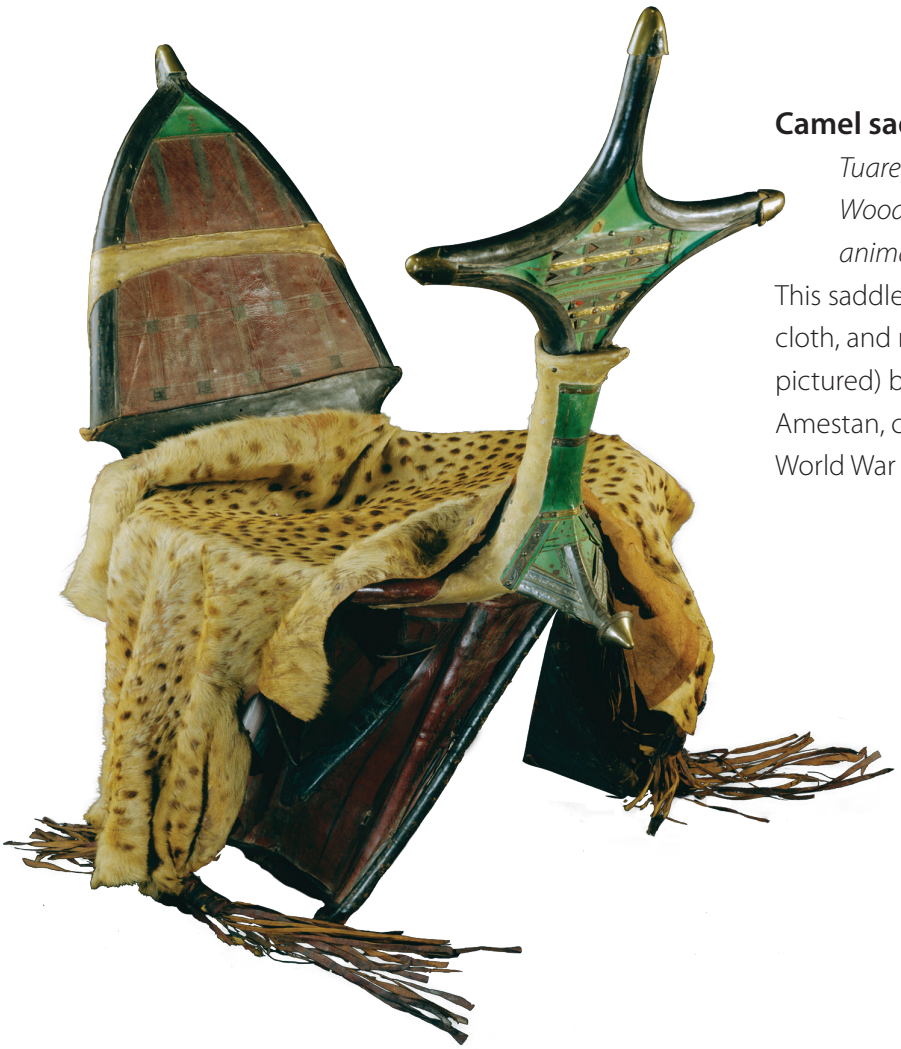
- In other courses, you have perhaps become familiar with close, critical readings of texts and the attention that must be paid to context, authorship, and audience. Looking at objects, however, incorporates some different skills. This guide will walk you through the process of looking at anthropological objects.
- Inside, you will find suggestions of questions to ask of an object, to help you draw connections between its physical qualities and your initial interpretations, and to help you formulate new avenues of inquiry.
- Your research on objects will also include examining documents at the Peabody Museum, as well as in University libraries. There are numerous textual sources at the Museum to examine, including accession files, accession cards, ledger books, and other associated archival documents and photographs. Not all of the object collections have associated documentation, but please ask so that you may review all potential textual sources with Peabody staff.

This guide is also intended to help you locate yourself in your research – much as you would when doing a close reading of archival or secondary sources – to help you to articulate the associations on which you are building your interpretation.

- An object will provide different information depending on the questions you ask of it, as viewed from different perspectives. Understanding yourself in your research process will allow you to gain from those perspectives and expand the possible meanings you may discover, as you learn from the peoples and cultures represented by or associated with an object.

Basic procedures

1. Looking is your starting point. Observations should prompt questions, connections, and further research.
2. Focus on the object. Ask simple, straightforward questions based on what you see.
3. Consider the object on its own, and in its own right. Save interpretations for later.
4. Spend as much time as possible with the object. Consider drawing your object; it will help you discover more detail. Use photography only as an aid to memory.
5. Review associated Peabody Museum documentation. Depending on the object, these may include accession and/or catalogue cards, ledger entries, accession files, or archival materials.



Camel saddle, 975-32-50/11927

Tuareg, Algeria
Wood, metal, leather,
animal pelt, hide, pigment

This saddle, cheetah-skin saddle cloth, and matching saddle bag (not pictured) belonged to Moussa ag Amestan, chief of Kel Ahaggar, during World War I and the Saharan uprising.

Step 1 Describe the Object

Description

What is the size and shape of the object?
What is it made of?
Is it decorated?
What colors do you see?
Are there any designs?
Are they systematic or random?
Is it made of several parts?

Use

Do you see evidence of the object's use?
Is it worn, broken, or burnt?
Has it been repaired?
Has it been mounted, as for a museum exhibit?
Is anything missing?
Would it look different if it were in use?

Interpretation

Does the object have a top and bottom?
A front and back?
How can you tell?
What crafts, skills, or technologies were required to produce it?
How do you think it was used?
Where or how was it held or worn?
Would it have been used by itself?
Could it be part of something else?
Do you think it has been repaired?
If yes, when do you think this occurred?

Fibula, 40-77-40/10927

Vinicia, Slovenia
Late Iron Age
Bronze

Used to fasten and adorn clothing. Excavated by Duchess Marie Friedrich of Mecklenburg.

What materials are present?
Was the metal cast using molds?
Was it hammered?
Are the beads uniform in size and shape?
What colors are present? Is there evidence these colors have changed over time?
Does anything seem missing?
How might this have looked in use? Would e verything have been visible?
How might this have moved when in use? Would it have made noise?

Step 2 Think about the Object

What is/was it?

What do you think the object is?
What do you think the designs or decorations depict or reference?
When/why do you think it would have been made or used?
In what season?
For what occasion(s)?
Is this type of object used today?

Maker and User

Who do you think made the object?
Was the maker the same as the user?
If not, in what ways was the maker different from the user?
Different skills, status, or gender?
Where do you think the maker/user was from?
Did the maker /user need specialized knowledge?
How long do you think it took to make?
For how long do you think it would be used?
Would it be readily replaced, or carefully protected?

Connections

Does the object display materials, designs, or motifs from multiple locations?
How do you think it was used or valued by different communities and/or individuals?
How do you think it came to be in the Peabody Museum?

Side-fold dress, 99-12-10/53047

Central Plains, Lakota or Cheyenne
ca. 1800–1825
Bison hide, dyed and undyed porcupine quills, dyed bird quills, gilt brass buttons, cowrie shells, glass beads, tin-plated sheet-iron tinklers, horsehair, plant fiber, woven cotton tape, wool cloth, sinew, glue sizing, pigments

Long attributed to the Lewis and Clark expedition of 1804–1806, recent research suggests that this dress was probably acquired by Lt. George C Hutter in 1828–1830.

Glass beads, metal buttons, cowrie shells: what networks of exchange could have brought these to the Plains?
Would every Lakota or Cheyenne woman have had access to these materials? In such quantities?

Step 3 Think about Yourself

Personal connections and perceptions

How are you responding to the object?

Can you articulate or explain this response?

Where are your eyes drawn?

Where are your thoughts drawn?

Does the size or scale of the object affect how you feel?

What surprises you about the object?

What surprises you about your response to the object?

Reflections

Were you previously familiar with this object, or this kind of object?

What is the source of this familiarity?

What experiences are you drawing on to understand or interpret the object?

What does it remind you of from your own life?

What bodies of knowledge or theory are you applying to understand your object?

What does it recall from other histories?

What might you be taking for granted as you make your interpretations?

If you don't take this for granted, can you find alternative interpretations?

What cultural or social issues does it raise for you?

How do you address those?

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Peabody Museum staff and researchers examining an Alutiiq baidarka (03-40-10/62812), or three-hatch kayak, from Kodiak Island.

Part of a 2011 Save America's Treasures grant, allowing for the study and conservation of over 100 Alutiiq items in the Peabody Museum's collections. Conducted in collaboration with Alaska's Alutiiq Museum.

Some Final Thoughts

As you conduct your object research, you will contextualize it through consideration of other primary sources, such as the Peabody Museum's associated documentation, or perhaps through comparison with other similar objects. You will build your understanding of it through study of secondary and tertiary sources.

Remember that context impacts interpretations of an object; they will change over time, and vary between places.

Do not leave yourself out of these considerations. You, too, are part of the context that will decide what story your object has to tell, as you help to tell it.

Awareness of your own emotions, reactions, interests, and concerns as you conduct your analysis is a part of your research. It allows you to question your subjectivity; to locate and test your assumptions; and to see your perspective as one of many. Your goal is not to speak for the object, or for the peoples or cultures an object may represent, but to place yourself in your experience of research. Doing so will better position you to recognize the experiences and perspectives of others, to hear their voices, and so contribute to the sharing of their stories.

Front cover

Dog head effigy vessel, 92-49-20/C183

Maya; Copan, Honduras; Ceramic, pigment

Possibly used as an artist's palette.