



## EDUCATOR GUIDE

### Collecting: Uncovering America through its Objects

“Collecting’ is a ubiquitous human activity, spanning all ages and all kinds of societies.”

- University of Cambridge

#### Lesson Overview

To begin this lesson, students discuss the Semiquincentennial anniversary of the United States of America and the subsequent celebration commemorating 250 years since the birth of the nation. Students engage in a series of activities designed to generate interaction with a digital collection of American artifacts curated by the Decorative Arts Trust, honoring this monumental anniversary. These activities aim to introduce learners to the objects and establish a bridge between the role of student observer and the role of the student collector.

In this lesson, the curated group of objects, titled **Collecting250** (<https://collecting250.com>), takes center stage. This collection honors 250 years of craft in America, representing handwork and manufactured pieces from all fifty states as well as the District of Columbia. Following the introductory activity, students explore possible reasons why humans engage in collecting. They pair and share collections they have or are familiar with before participating in a role-playing exercise as private collectors.

In the culminating activity, students lead their own museum spaces and curate a selected series of objects using Collecting250 as the source for their collections. They outline how the objects in their collection share similar traits, establish their collections’ worth, and organize the objects for a classroom presentation. In the final virtual display, students compete in various categories honoring the pieces in their collection. Students name and discuss what they judge to be the most historically significant collection, the most expensive collection, and the most cohesively designed presentation as a conclusion to this activity.

The final level of inquiry invites students to take part in a fictional theft of their favorite object presented by their classmates. In this culminating activity, students investigate the origins and historical significance of that artifact and create a poster that communicates a plea for its return. Components of design and composition anchor the lesson to reflect the characteristics of the object, and researched information about the artifact sets the tone for its historical and cultural relevance, as well as its emotional and monetary value.

**Grade Levels:** 6–12

**Estimated Time:** Eight 45-minute class periods/sessions

## **Background Information**

**Collecting250** (<https://collecting250.com>) is a virtual museum presented by the Decorative Arts Trust and organized in recognition of the United States' 2026 Semiquincentennial. The site features a wide range of objects from collections and museums across the United States, gathered together to present a unique representation of America through the lens of the decorative arts. The site states it is an *“online collection of meaningful and impactful objects that represent independence, identity, and community...that tell the story of America.”* The objects were selected by curators and historians across the United States, representing over 140 museums and historical societies. There are seven separate galleries on the site: Ceramics; Folk Art, Instruments, and Tools; Furniture and Clocks; Glass; Maps, Prints, and Paintings; Metalwork; and Textiles. The collection can be explored through the individual galleries by clicking on a single image of an object within the gallery. The collection can also be explored by using the map and the list of objects at the bottom of the home page.

Immersion in such a collection allows the viewer to ponder the origins of collecting as well as the psychological propensity associated with the collection of things. The University of Cambridge website (2021) suggests: *“Collecting is a ubiquitous human activity, spanning all ages and all kinds of societies.”* Furthermore, it asserts that examining a set of objects, *“... can reveal an extraordinary range of connections between the world of “things’ and the human world of ideas, values and meanings.”* Such investigations lead us to consider questions including: Why might an individual accumulate and collect? How might a specific set of objects reflect personality and societal concerns across time and culture? How do we gain insight to the past through the observation of artifacts? as well as, What is revealed when we view objects through the lens of those who curate, disperse or display collections?

## **PREPARATION**

### **Key Concepts**

- People collect things for a variety of reasons.
- Collections reflect the community from which they derive.
- Communities and individuals curate spaces to honor, acknowledge, or share collections.

### **Critical Questions**

- Why might an individual or group collect objects?
- How might a collection reflect community?
- What might a specific collection communicate about an individual or an organization?
- In what ways do people organize or share their collections?

### **Objectives**

- Students will investigate possible reasons why people collect objects.
- Students will speculate how a collection of objects might reflect the interests and values of a particular community and/or time in history.
- Students will select objects and curate an exhibition in which objects exemplify a theme or idea.

## Vocabulary

Semiquintecennial, decorative arts, artifact, aesthetics, community, curate

## Interdisciplinary Connections (Relevant Standards or References to interdisciplinary learning)

- **History & Social Studies:** Through the investigation of specific time periods, students identify and explain objects' relationships to the times and places in which they were created.
  - For example, consider Robert Gundersen's electric lamp or electrolier from the glass gallery. This object can open a discussion relating to the period of history identified as the "Roaring Twenties." It shares the characteristics of a work sitting neatly in the transition from Art Nouveau into Art Deco marrying the curved line with the geometric design identified with these art movements. Through the work and its departure from simplicity and function, leaning into decoration and aesthetics, one can begin to more closely understand the state of the social and economic world by identifying and reflecting on the social energy and economic condition of this time period prior to the Great Depression.
  - Additional Historical connections can be seen as students identify the imagery depicted on The Trenton Vase, by the Trenton Potteries Company. This four-and-a-half-foot porcelain urn introduces the viewer to the historically significant moment when Washington crossed the Delaware during the Revolutionary War. Additionally Revolutionary War times can be explored in the Metal Collection as participants view the "Sons of Liberty" bowl crafted by Paul Revere in commemoration of the "Glorious Ninety-Two." These individuals are known for their acts of protest leading to the Revolutionary War.
- **English Literature:** Objects are connected to time periods allowing the learner to visually expand their understanding of setting within the context of a work of literature.
  - With Robert Gundersen's electric lamp or electrolier such a connection can be made when viewed in the context of a novel set in the same time and place such as the popular secondary literature selection *The Great Gatsby*. This novel, set in 1922, celebrates opulence and Gundersen's ornate glass work opens the door to understanding the works that possibly adorned Jay Gatsby's home at that place, in that timeframe.
- **Mathematics:** Through the reverse google search, students will begin to process the value of these objects as they navigate auction and acquisition information for the pieces. Additionally, students will be curating their collection and listing the known approximate values of each piece in efforts to arrive at the estimated cost of their full set of artifacts. Students will complete the mathematical equation adding all their objects together and run a comparison with classmates for the title of "most expensive" collection.

## National Visual Arts Standards

### Creating

*Anchor Standard 2: Organize and develop artistic ideas and work.*

VA:Cr2.3.7a Apply visual organizational strategies to design and produce a work of art, design, or media that clearly communicates information or ideas.

VA:Cr2.3.8a Select, organize, and design images and words to make visually clear and compelling presentations.

### **Presenting**

*Anchor Standard 4: Select, analyze, and interpret artistic work for presentation.*

VA:Pr4.1.6a Analyze similarities and differences associated with preserving and presenting two-dimensional, three-dimensional, and digital artwork.

VA:Pr4.1.7a Compare and contrast how technologies have changed the way artwork is preserved, presented, and experienced.

VA:Pr4.1.1a Analyze, select, and curate artifacts and/or artworks for presentation and preservation.

VA:Pr4.1.11a Critique, justify, and present choices in the process of analyzing, selecting, curating, and presenting artwork for a specific exhibit or event.

*Anchor Standard 5: Develop and refine artistic techniques and work for presentation*

VA:Pr5.1.8a Collaboratively prepare and present selected theme-based artwork for display, and formulate exhibition narratives for the viewer.

*Anchor Standard 6: Convey meaning through the presentation of artistic work.*

VA:Pr6.1.1a Analyze and describe the impact that an exhibition or collection has on personal awareness of social, cultural, or political beliefs and understandings.

VA:Cr2.3.7a Apply visual organizational strategies to design and produce a work of art, design, or media that clearly communicates information or ideas.

### **Responding**

*Anchor Standard 7: Perceive and analyze artistic work*

VA:Re.7.1.7a Explain how the method of display, the location, and the experience of an artwork influence how it is perceived and valued.

VA:Re.7.1.8a Explain how a person's aesthetic choices are influenced by culture and environment and impact the visual image that one conveys to others.

VA:Re.7.2.11a Evaluate the effectiveness of an image or images to influence ideas, feelings, and behaviors of specific audiences.

VA:Re.7.2.11a Determine the commonalities within a group of artists or visual images attributed to a particular type of art, timeframe, or culture.

### **Connecting:**

*Anchor Standard 10: Synthesize and relate knowledge and personal experiences to make art.*

VA:Cn10.1.7a Individually or collaboratively create visual documentation of places and times in which people gather to make and experience art or design in the community.

*Anchor standard 11: Relate artistic ideas and works with societal, cultural, and historical context to deepen understanding.*

VA:Cn11.1.7.a Analyze how response to art is influenced by understanding the time and place in which it was created, the available resources, and cultural uses.

VA:Cn11.1.8a Distinguish different ways art is used to represent, establish, reinforce, and reflect group identity.

VA:Cn11.1.1a Describe how knowledge of culture, traditions, and history may influence personal responses to art.

VA:Cn11.1.IIa Compare uses of art in a variety of societal, cultural, and historical contexts and make connections to uses of art in contemporary and local contexts.

### **Other Relevant Standards**

#### **English Literature Standards**

CC.1.4: Writing: Students write for different purposes and audiences. Students write clear and focused text to convey a well-defined perspective and appropriate content.

CC.1.4.9-10.F Demonstrate a grade-appropriate command of the conventions of standard English grammar, usage, capitalization, punctuation, and spelling.

CC.1.4.9-10.U Use technology, including the Internet, to produce, publish, and update individual or shared writing products, taking advantage of technology's capacity to link to other information and to display information flexibly and dynamically.

CC.1.5: Speaking and Listening: Students present appropriately in formal speaking situations, listen critically, and respond intelligently as individuals or in group discussions.

CC.1.5.9-10.F Make strategic use of digital media in presentations to add interest and enhance understanding of findings, reasoning, and evidence.

#### **Social Studies Standards**

6.2.9.B Explain how competition between buyers and sellers affects price

8.1.9.B Compare the interpretation of historical events and **sources**, considering the use of fact versus **opinion**, multiple perspectives, and cause and effect relationships.

8.2.9.B Compare the impact of historical documents, artifacts, and places in Pennsylvania which are critical to U.S. history.

8.3.9.B Compare the impact of historical documents, artifacts, and places which are critical to the U.S

### **Resources and Materials for Teaching**

#### **Resources**

- Collecting250 website [collecting250.org](http://collecting250.org)
- Google Slides/ Google Drive Canva/Adobe Creative Cloud Suite/Publishing software One to One Ipad/Laptop/Device to access collection
- Projection screen
- Printer

#### **Materials**

- Pencils or Pens
- Collage Materials (for non-digital product)
- Glue/Scissors/Rulers (for non-digital product)
- Bristol/Tag Board paper (for non-digital product)
- Drawing paper (for non-digital product)

## Worksheets

- Reproduce one per student or per group, if desired
- Worksheet One, Engagement Activity: BINGO worksheet
- Worksheet Two: What do we collect?
- Worksheet Three: A Curated Set Planning Page
- Worksheet Four: Awards Ballot worksheet
- Worksheet Five: Missing! A Poster Brainstorming Page

## INSTRUCTIONAL STRATEGIES

### Investigate: Engage and Explore (Two class periods)

#### 1. Explore the Collection with BINGO (Session 1)

Project and share the website [Collecting250.com](http://Collecting250.com). Introduce the students to the concept of the Semiquintecennial Anniversary of the United States of America as the formal word used to describe the time period of 250 years since the birth of our nation. Present the Decorative Arts Trust as the organization responsible for curating this collection of objects to honor this moment in time. Emphasize the inclusion of both manufactured and handmade works and the understanding that the pieces of the collection represent all fifty of our United States and the District of Columbia.

- While students view the collection on the projection screen or on their individual devices, provide a tour of the website. Explain the organization of the collection into seven categories including Ceramics, Folk Art, Instruments & Tools, Furniture & Clocks, Glass, Map, Prints, & Paintings, Metal Work, and Textiles. Demonstrate how to access the category, highlighting the access point for each object's individual description. Underscore the location of information needed to complete the activity including the category of the collection, the name of the object, the maker of the object, and the date of creation.
- Once students understand how to navigate the site, distribute **Worksheet One: "BINGO Scavenger Hunt"**. Explain that this scavenger hunt affords them the opportunity to make aesthetic choices based on their personal taste. Define Aesthetics as the study of beauty. Remind students that the choices are their own, and they cannot be "wrong."
- By viewing the artifacts in each category, students search for a work that aligns with the appropriate prompt on the BINGO Card using any of the objects within the collection. The first student to identify the collection/object/maker/date in five categories across or diagonal should announce BINGO!
- *Note: Parameters can shift according to grade level and per teacher instruction, including limiting 1 artifact per square without repetition, completing five in a row, four corners, or completing the full card. Lesson expansion can include pair and share of any prompt or more generally the most favorite or most unusual work.*
- Have students share collections (their five across or down as highlighted on their BINGO card) with one classmate or in a small group. Suggest that they discuss which objects they have selected, identifying their favorite, the most unusual, or one they felt was particularly interesting.

## 2. Ponder “What and Why do People Collect?” (Session 2)

- Return to Collecting250 and remind students of the reason for this collection taking place currently, with this particular group of objects. Have students consider the idea of collecting by reflecting on the questions included on **Worksheet Two: “What do we collect?”**.
- For a large group discussion or as an individual quiet reflection activity, propose the following questions/discussion points, and transition into a small group sharing session.
  - Name an object you have seen an individual collect.
  - Why do you think that object was special to that person?
  - How have you seen a collection displayed?
  - Does anyone in your family have a collection?
  - What do they collect?
  - Do you collect anything? If so, what do you collect?
  - Why do you think someone might collect a particular object? (see below)
- After considering their own or another’s collection, ask students to consider the list of possible reasons below. Do any of these reasons resonate with them?
  - **Nostalgia/Evoke Memories:** collecting can evoke positive memories and emotions associated with an individual’s childhood or other impactful moments of life.
  - **Aesthetic Appreciation:** collecting can be driven by the beauty of the objects to the collector.
  - **Order and Control:** collecting can bring a sense of organization to a collector when the world feels too chaotic.
  - **Emotional Comfort:** collecting can provide a sense of familiarity and security to a collector.
  - **Coping Mechanism:** Collecting can provide a distraction from daily stress
  - **Self-Identity:** Collecting can allow an individual to express oneself and provide a way for a collector to present their interests.
  - **Stress Release:** Collecting, researching and displaying a collection can be a stress relieving pastime.
  - **Personal Enjoyment:** the act of hunting for and acquiring treasures can be an enjoyable hobby and a rewarding experience for the collector.
  - **Social Interaction:** creating community as a collector of shared objects can foster a sense of belonging.
  - **Sharing Knowledge:** collectors become the keepers of the past and the act of educating others about a specific collection can be a satisfying endeavor and bring added purpose to the collection.
  - **Recognition and Prestige:** collecting rare objects can substantiate the collectors hobby and elevate their status in their specific genre of collecting.
  - **Financial Investments:** collecting objects in certain instances can become a lucrative investment as objects appreciate over time.
  - **Preservation of History:** collecting can play a role in preserving historical artifacts and cultural pieces.

- **Reflect Loyalty:** collecting can show allegiance to a country of origin, a sports team, or a hometown.

### **Investigate: Make Connections (Three class periods)**

#### **1. Select Objects for Display (Session 3)**

- Invite students to participate in a role-playing exercise as private collectors with their own gallery space. Suggest that they return to their BINGO card and select one object from their original five as the lead object in their own curated collection.
- Have students return to the Collecting250 site to select four more pieces with a similar time in history taking note of similar characteristics the objects possess. Distribute **Worksheet Three: A Curated Set Planning Page**. Suggest that they use the worksheet to record information about their chosen objects.
- Suggest that, based on the shared historical connection and similar traits that the objects share, students establish a theme for their set.
- Explain how students will build their own “display” via Canva, PowerPoint, or Google Slide show. Prior to creating their display, students will consider what is involved in curating an exhibition.

#### **2. Create and Share Presentations (Sessions 4 and 5)**

- As students organize their five objects, suggest that they focus on the sequence in which they are ordered. Explain that in sequencing the objects it is important to consider how they want the viewer to experience their collection. Curating the viewing order with thoughtfulness allows the collector to share the work in such a way that more fully honors its story. Help students understand that the objects in their collection should speak to the viewer as they move from object #1 through to object #5.
- Guide students to understand that the objects might have connections through media, subject matter, historical significance, function, or fundamental design elements and that those aspects of the objects should be celebrated in the overall look of their final presentation.
- Encourage students to generate their slides incorporating information about the object, its maker, date of creation, media/material, characteristics, historical significance and overall estimated value. They may refer to the Collecting250 site for each of these, except for “value.” Students may use images of the objects to engage in a reverse Google search to discover estimated value. Through the reverse image search, AI may further assist in enhancing the search to discover the cost of the object(s) at auction.
- Invite students to present their works to the class. Prior to the start of the presentations, provide each student with **Worksheet Four: Awards Ballot** to cast their vote for the top presentations based on the following:
  - Most Historically Significant Collection
  - Most Cohesively Designed Presentation
  - Most Expensive Collection

- Note that the assignment of such “awards” ought to generate a lively discussion about each of the categories. Encourage students to talk about the process they employed to determine the award winner in each category. How did they arrive at their decisions? What did they consider? What factors contribute to a collection being the most historically significant or the most expensive? What contributes to a collection having a cohesive design? Might these determinations change from time to time? What might account for something having great monetary value at one point in time and not at another time? What might account for something having historical significance? Might this also change, depending on the time it is considered or the person designating it as having such significance? Remind students that engagement in a discussion such as this requires that they “try on” the points of view offered by their classmates and seriously consider the ideas offered by others. Wrap up the discussion by repeating some of the major points discussed and the questions that remain as a result of the discussion.
- Invite students to identify an object that they would like to steal from another collection (as in a traditional holiday game in which players “steal” a wrapped package from another player) to add to their collection that they did not previously feature in their set. The students should record the object they would most like to steal at the space allocated on the worksheet.

### 3. “Steal” from A Collection (Session 6 and 7)

- The final activity involves the theft of an object from another collection. At the close of the presentations, have students consider which object they wish they had in their own collection. Acting as a thief, students steal an object that falls outside of their own curated set. This object should be one that they were most intrigued by or most impressed by at the time of the class presentations.
- Introduce the creation of a “Missing” poster for that object. Using the information from the gallery owner’s presentation and the information they find on Collecting250 website, have them design a poster for the object they stole from the gallery owner. Suggest that they create the poster using Canva, Adobe Creative Cloud Suite, or another digital processing software or, alternatively, using media and paper. Posters should incorporate information about the object, maker, date of creation, media, characteristics, historical significance, overall estimated value, and a plea for its return that includes a reward!
- To begin the planning, distribute **Worksheet Five: Missing! Poster Brainstorming**. Have students complete the worksheet to document the information they must add to their design. Finally, have them generate thumbnail sketches to arrive at a design that fully celebrates the object of their desire, articulating a clear reward for the return of this valued object.
- Provide studio time to create the poster

### Reflect and Refine (Session 8) (.5 class)

#### Reflection Questions

1. What have you enjoyed most about your interaction with the Collecting250 objects?
2. Which object did you find the most captivating to learn about through the course of the activities?
3. What is the most significant fact you have learned about objects over these last 250 years?

### **Reflect and Assess (.5 class)**

Through conversations with students, observation of their work, and examining worksheets and projects, it should be evident that the student:

- investigated reasons why people might collect objects;
- speculated how a collection of objects might reflect the interests and values of a particular community and/or time in history;
- and selected objects and curated an exhibition in which objects exemplify a theme or idea.

### **Additional Resources**

- The Barnes foundation offers a contrasting view of curating, collecting, and displaying through the eyes of Albert C. Barnes: <https://www.barnesfoundation.org/about>.
- The Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City explains their collecting policies: <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collecting-practices>.

### **Extensions**

- Studio extension #1: Create a still life drawing of object(s) from Collecting250, with a focus on composition, light, and shadow.
- Studio extension #2: Create a vessel suitable to house or display an object from the collection. Investigate Reliquary.

*The Educator Guide, Collecting: Uncovering America through its Objects (2025), was developed by Dr. Karen Gidas-Sidorick, Art Educator, Downingtown Area School District, Downingtown, PA, under the direction of Dr. Marilyn Stewart, Professor Emerita of Art Education, Kutztown University of Pennsylvania, Kutztown, PA.*