



EDUCATOR GUIDE

The Functions of Objects: An American Collection

Lesson Overview

In this lesson, students will investigate a digital collection of American objects featured by the Decorative Arts Trust in recognition of the United States 2026 Semiquincentennial. The site, **Collecting250** (<https://collecting250.com>) features over 250 decorative objects gathered from all 50 states and the District of Columbia. First guided by the teacher and then working with partners, students examine various objects in the collection and determine their function through the question, “What job does this object do?” Finally, students present a proposal (in trading card form) for the acquisition of an object, historic or present-day, that they believe should be included in the collection, highlighting how the object represents an aspect of the United States. Students’ trading cards are eventually shared in a school display in recognition of the Semiquincentennial.

Grade Levels: 8–12

Estimated Time: Four to five 45-minute 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.

PREPARATION

Key Concepts

- Objects are made to perform a function.
- Objects may work in ways beyond their original intended function.
- Investigating objects and how they function can teach us about the people who used them and the places in which they were used.

Critical Questions

- How do objects perform functions?
- How do objects work in ways beyond their original intended function?
- How does investigating objects and their functions teach us about the people who used them and the places in which they were used?
- What problem was this object attempting to solve?
- How did the inventor of this object intend to make life easier with this object?

Objectives

- Students will investigate how objects perform functions.
- Students will research how objects may work in ways beyond their original intended functions.
- Students will propose an object to add to the online collection that teaches about the people who use/used it and the place in which it is/was used.

Vocabulary

Acquisition, artifact, community, cultural, decorative arts, function, material culture, nkisi, Semiquincentennial, status, tombstone. (Note: Tombstone here refers to the word's use as a museum label of information about an object.)

Interdisciplinary Connections

- **History and Social Studies:** Many objects here will add interesting details to history lessons, for example there are a number of Colonial America and Revolutionary War objects. See George Washington's "watch seal" that was attached to his pocket watch and was used to add a wax seal to documents and letters, a poffertjes pan from his kitchen that enslaved cooks used to prepare his favorite Dutch pancakes, and a locket that holds a lock of his hair obtained after his death. All of these are in the Metalwork gallery.
- **Economics and Trade:** The collection includes many examples of manufactured objects, including some which show the early Americans' desire to develop their own "manufacturies" so as to be less reliant on England for goods. See the 1789 Tumbler and its story in the Glass gallery. At the same time, many pieces illustrate the complexities of trade; for example, pieces that were made in, or use materials from, other countries. See the 1802 Tea Set in the Ceramics gallery.

National Standards for Visual Arts Education:

Creating:

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

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:Pr5.1.1a Analyze and evaluate the reasons and ways an exhibition is presented.

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.

Connecting:

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.

Common Core State Standards for English and Language Arts & Literacy in History/Social Studies, Science, and Technical Subjects:

Reading Standards for Informational Text 6-12

Key Ideas and Details:

Grades 9-10 students 1. Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as references drawn from the text.

Writing Standards for Literacy in History/Social Studies, Science, and Technical Subjects 6-12

Research to Build and Present Knowledge:

Grades 9-10 students 7. Conduct short as well as more sustained research projects to answer a question (including a self-generated question) or solve a problem; narrow or broaden the inquiry when appropriate; synthesize multiple sources on the subject, demonstrating understanding of the subject under investigation.

RESOURCES AND MATERIALS FOR TEACHING

Resources

- **Collecting250 website** (<https://collecting250.com>)
- Print a selection of objects from the collection and their descriptions for classroom display.
- Display the Key Concepts, Critical Questions, and Objectives on the board, on posters, or digitally.
- List the vocabulary words on posters or create a handout.
- **Function Search Terms list (to be cut into labels)**
- Create a set of **Function Cards** for use with Worksheet Two: Function Search Challenge. Print the **Function Search Terms** list (2 copies will make an ample deck) for use with **Worksheet Two**. Cut the functions apart to use as labels. Tape or glue one function label to each 3x5-inch index card. Or hand write the functions on the cards.
- One each of seven 4x6-inch index cards, write the name of a **Collecting250** gallery (Textiles, Ceramics, Metalwork, etc.). Optionally, print out images of three objects from each gallery, mount on 4x6-inch index cards for the final Trading Card activity.

Materials:

- 3x5-inch index cards for the Functions Search Challenge; 50 or more
- 4x6-inch index cards for the trading card activity: 30 for teacher-made cards and at least 2 for each student

- Sketchbooks or journals
- Pencils, pens, and markers
- Rulers
- Stick glue and/or white glue
- Scissors
- Optional: Materials for optional individual projects (see Extensions below)

Worksheets:

- Worksheet One: Researching the Functions of Two American Objects (Student Edition)
- Worksheet One: Researching the Functions of Two American Objects (Teacher Edition)
- Worksheet Two: Part One: Choosing an Object; Part Two: Functions Search Challenge
- Worksheet Three: Proposal for an Object for Acquisition to the Collecting250 Online Museum: Make an Object Trading Card

INSTRUCTIONAL STRATEGIES

Investigate: Engage and Explore

1. Discuss Objects and Functions (Session/Day 1)

Note: It will be helpful to familiarize yourself with the collection ahead of time; even so, teacher and students can learn about the objects together as the class “wanders” through the galleries, similar to a field trip.

- Tell students they will be investigating the online **Collecting250**, then share the Background Information section (above) with students. Let them know that they will be looking at manufactured as well as handmade objects, and that some of the objects were made in the U.S. but others were imported and used in the U.S., as is still common today.
- You may want to place students in small groups or partnerships so they can share information and ideas as the class engages with the site.
- Divide the vocabulary words among the groups of students, and have each group look up their assigned words and record the definitions on the board. The class can write the words and definitions in their sketchbooks.
- Introduce the collection to students on a large screen (and on their laptops, if using.) Walk students through the **Collecting250** site, showing them the home page, the individual galleries, and some individual objects.
- Guide students through examining the idea of function, and the functions of two objects: the lamp and the iron in the Metalwork gallery. Share the two images on a screen, and use the example discussion guides that follow, as needed, to engage students to look closely at the objects and think about how they function.

Discussion Guide 1: Functional Objects: How Do They Work?

*“Objects are made to do something: some kind of work, or function. We can ask, ‘What job does this object do?’ For example, the **lantern** (in the Metalwork gallery) is an object that*

*was made to help people see in the dark. In the same gallery, the late-19th-century **iron** was made to press the wrinkles out of clothes and linens. It is called a sad iron. Who can find out why they are called sad irons? You will have to research beyond the label description. Do a quick online search and let me know when you find an explanation.”* Allow students search time, and let them share the information: *“Sad refers to an old English word for heavy or dense. The irons are made of cast iron and so they are very heavy.”* Students may ask about the number on the iron: *The number on the iron refers to its size, as different sized irons would be used for different clothes and linens.*

Discussion Guide 2: Functional Objects: More Than One Job?

“Objects can have more than one function. The lantern also functioned as a flashing signal to warn colonists that ‘The British are coming!’ and prepared colonists to mount a defense in America’s struggle for independence from British rule. Today, the lantern functions as an artifact of the beginning of the United States. The sad iron was kept by the daughter of the woman who used it. The iron then functioned as a remembrance of her mother and grandmother. Who can find the names of the mother and daughter?” Allow students search time, and let them share the information: *“This time the information can be found in the description given. The Mother’s name is Lavada Kelley and her daughter is Bettye Kelley Washington. Today the iron also functions as a museum piece that tells a story of women’s labor and the ongoing struggle for civil rights in America. Irons such as this one are also prized by people who buy and collect them.”* To summarize, you might repeat the underlined functions of the lantern and the iron as a review.

2. Researching Objects and Functions (Session/Day 2 Part 1)

- Hand out and introduce **Worksheet One: Researching the Functions of Two American Objects**. Circulate with students as work in their groups, helping them locate the objects and the information. The worksheet describes two different objects, the Tea Set in the Ceramics gallery and the Nkisi in the Textiles gallery. It guides students through a checklist to help them think deeply about each object. When the worksheets are complete, review the information and ideas as a group. This is a good time to talk about assumptions, and how the class might further research their ideas and guesses beyond the information given on the site. For example, how might the class find out more about the production of the tea sets, or Mary Hollingsworth’s life? How might the class learn more about the many functions and meanings of nkisi? (These discussions can occur with the full class or in small groups or “four corners” breakouts.)

3. Choosing an Object (Session/Day 2 Part 2)

- Hand out and introduce **Worksheet Two: Choosing an Object and Function Search Challenge**. In the first section, **Choosing an Object**, students get to browse the collection and choose one object of interest to report on. They follow the same steps for filling in the information as in the previous worksheet. Working with partners, whether they choose the same or different objects, allows students the chance to discuss the objects and think about answers. Circulate to check

for questions and understanding. (As an extension, the teacher could choose an object meaningful to them as an example for the lesson.)

4. Function Search CHALLENGE (Session/Day 2 Part 3)

- In the second part of this worksheet, **Function Search Challenge**, students work with a partner or small group to identify objects that fit the function of the card they chose, writing the names of objects rapidly on their worksheet. You can vary the number of function cards they choose each round, the time you give them to search, and how they win, etc. For example: Start with one deck of functions. Shuffle the function cards and place upside-down on a table. Let one member of each group select two cards without looking at them. When everyone has their cards, set a timer and say “Go!” In the time allotted, the students search the collection for objects that fit the function on the card, and write them quickly on their worksheet. The team finding the most objects wins. Play several times with students choosing new function cards each time.

Investigate: Make Connections

1. Make an Object Trading Card: (Session/Day 3)

- Hand out and introduce **Worksheet Three: Proposal for an Object for Acquisition to the Collecting250 Online Museum**.
- Go over Worksheet Three with students so they understand the project.
- Demonstrate designing a trading card.

Demonstration of trading card design: Note: It can be helpful to have several trading cards prepared ahead of time. Gather students around a table with supplies laid out. Recruit a student volunteer to work next to you at the same time. Use a sketchbook or scratch paper to demonstrate planning the trading card design: Show several options from an online search that could represent an object. Explain how students can print out the object to fit on the card, or how they can use the image as a guide to drawing their own version. Rough in different shapes, such as rectangles and circles, and “think out loud” for students. *“This is where I’ll place the image. The name of the object will go here, and a block of text here”* etc. Encourage the student volunteer to demonstrate along with you. Remind students that at this point, it is still easy to change their design. Demonstrate neatly drawing the image or gluing the image of the object to the card. Demonstrate using rulers to make straight lines for text, and the application of color using markers.

- Invite students to create their own Trading Card Proposals.

2. Reflect and Refine: (Session/Day 4 Part 1)

- When student cards are complete, have them place their cards on a large table or a wall organized into the seven galleries (with optional selections from the Collecting250 site).
- Engage the class in a conversation about the proposed objects and the galleries in which their objects would be placed. Why did students choose their object? How did they choose to place their object in a particular gallery? The class might disagree with choices or want to rearrange

the cards. They might imagine an additional different gallery. The discussion can include the following “share with the school” task.

3. Share with the School: (Session/Day 4 Part 2)

- Ask students what they think about how the objects, individually and all together, “tell a story about America.”
- Have students arrange a display of their cards (including those featuring actual objects from the online collection) in a hallway to share with the school. Encourage them to think about what viewers might want to know about their object cards. How would they explain the online collection, and their own re-created collection, to a friend? Let them work together to create signage explaining the display.

4. Reflect and Assess: (Session/Day 5)

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

- investigated how an object performs a function.
- researched how an object may work in ways beyond their original intended function.
- presented a proposal of an object to add to the online collection that teaches about the people who use/used it and the place in which it is/was used.

Additional Resources:

- Each of the featured objects comes from a museum that can be explored in itself. You can also use the map at the bottom of the **Collecting250** home page to find one in your state.
- **The Decorative Arts Trust** has a wealth of online exhibits in addition to **Collecting250**, and each exhibit could provide a lesson in itself. Go to the Trust’s home page at <https://decorativeartstrust.org>, click *Online Learning*, and then *Exhibits* from the drop-down menu.

Extensions: Students may want to create an actual object as their proposal for an addition to the collection. Consider the Ceramics; Textiles; and Maps, Prints, and Paintings galleries as potential inspiration for an original student creation, as these feature materials (clay, fabric, and paper) likely to be available and affordable.

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