



## EDUCATOR GUIDE

### Weaving a Storyline Across 250 Years

“Their quilts were often imbued with stories of lived experiences and collective journeys. In the civil rights era, quilts were used as tools to reflect the time, combining messages of political purpose alongside messages of empowerment in the march towards freedom.”

- description for *Civil Rights Quilt* (2001) by Hattie Childress

#### 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 independently, students examine various objects in the collection and then consider the underlying history of those objects through the question, “What story does this object have to share?” Finally, students create a historical fiction narrative that threads the stories of various objects from the collection into a storyboard that interweaves personal student stories with the stories told by objects found in the collection. This lesson guides learners into a deeper understanding of how objects can tell the story of America through the interrelation of personal narrative and historical investigation.

**Grade Levels:** 8–12

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

#### Background Information

Collecting250 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 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. Visitors can explore the collection through the individual galleries by clicking on a single image of an object within the gallery to find tombstone and additional information about the object and its historical context. The collection also can be explored by using the map and an illustrated list of objects at the bottom of the home page.

## **PREPARATION**

### **Key Concepts**

- Objects can prompt memories and stories.
- An object might have its own story—how it came to be, where it has been, what purposes it has served, who has cared for it, and so on.
- People often connect to objects through their own personal stories.

### **Critical Questions**

- How do objects prompt memories and stories?
- What can an object reveal about the people and culture from which it comes—how it came to be, where it has been, what purposes it has served, who cared for it, and so on?
- In what ways do people connect to objects through their own personal stories?

### **Objectives**

- Students will investigate and describe ways that objects prompt memories and stories.
- Students will research the people and culture associated with selected objects to explain how those objects came to be, where they have been, what purposes they have served, and who has cared for them.
- Students will create historical fiction narratives that connect to their own personal experiences through the interrelation of historical and personal stories.

### **Vocabulary**

Object, historical narrative, investigation, timeline, interpretation, critique, composition, medium, symbolism

### **Interdisciplinary Connections**

- **English Language Arts:** Students engage in close observation, interpretation, and storytelling throughout this lesson. As they investigate objects, students practice skills in descriptive and narrative writing, research-based explanation, and the development of original historical fiction narratives that integrate evidence with imagination. They also strengthen communication and critical thinking by sharing personal connections and reflecting on how objects hold meaning.
- **Social Studies:** Students research the cultural and historical context of objects, considering who made them, how they were used, and what they reveal about the values and experiences of people in the past. By blending research with creative/historical interpretation, students gain insight into the ways history and culture shape both material artifacts and personal stories.

### **National Standards for Visual Arts Education**

- VA:Cr2.1 (6–12) – Organize and develop artistic ideas and work.
- VA:Cr2.3 (6–12) – Demonstrate understanding of the relationship between personal ideas and societal, cultural, or historical context in visual art.
- VA:Cr3.1 (6–12) – Refine and complete artistic work.
- VA:Cn10.1 (6–12) – Synthesize and relate knowledge and personal experiences to make art.
- VA:Cn11.1 (6–12) – Relate artistic ideas and works with societal, cultural, and historical context to deepen understanding.

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

- Decorative Arts Trust Collecting250 website: <https://collecting250.com>

### **Worksheets**

- **Worksheet One: View and Respond**
- **Worksheet Two: Storyboarding**

### **INSTRUCTIONAL STRATEGIES**

#### **Investigate: Engage and Explore**

## Session 1: Discuss Objects and Their Stories

**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.

- Introduce the Collecting250 website and, drawing upon the Background Information (above), explain how and why the objects were gathered in the collection. Tell students that while there are many ways to explore the many objects in Collecting250, they will focus on the idea of “story.” They will consider the stories associated with the history of the objects and share stories that the objects inspire.
- Return to the Collecting250 website and show students an object of personal interest to you. Then, referring to your selected object, model an inquiry-led investigation that demonstrates what an independent investigation might look like for the students. *You may also choose to assign the View and Respond worksheet provided.*
- The following example offers a model for how this approach might look, in reference to the Short Dress featured in the Textiles collection:

Compare the Short Dress to clothing you or others wear today, noting similarities and differences. Ask the students and offer to them some of your own answers to questions such as:

### Questions about the Object:

- **What is this object?**
- **How is the object like and different from similar objects in your own time and place?**
- **What might have been the intended function or use of this object?**
- **What materials might have been used to make this object? What tools might have been involved in its making?**
- **Who might have made this object?**
- **What kind of condition is the object in?**
- **Why do you think the object looks the way it does?**
- **What symbols, if any, do you see? What might they mean?**
- **What story does this object have to share? (Where has it been? What has it seen? Who used it and for what purpose?)**
- **What does this object tell us about the time and place in which it was made and used?**
- **What do you like most about this object?**
- **What prompted you to select it?**

- **What more would you like to know about this object?**
- **How might you find out more?**

**Questions about the Object (with possible answers):**

- **What is this object?**

*This object is a type of dress, romper, or, perhaps, pajamas.*

- **How is the object like and different from similar objects in your own time and place?**

*This object - a Short Dress - is like my favorite pair of pajamas, but it's different, because the shape isn't the same. The shape also reminds me of a one-piece romper worn in the summertime but unlike a romper, it looks to be two pieces of clothing instead.*

- **What might have been the intended function or use of this object?**

*This Short Dress might have been used for work, play, or sleep, since it looks loose-fitting and comfortable. The croquet mallet and ball shown with the Short Dress make it seem like it was worn for outdoor activities.*

- **What materials might have been used to make this object? What tools might have been involved in its making?**

*Cotton, linen, or flannel might have been used to make this Short Dress or other Short Dresses like it. Needles, thread, and maybe a sewing machine might have been the tools used to make it. It could have been hand-sewn or machine sewn. The fabric itself might have been made on a loom.*

- **Who might have made this object?**

*A designer or the person who intended to wear the Short Dress might have made it from fabric. The fabric itself might have been made by a weaver using a loom.*

- **What kind of condition is the object in?**

*The Short Dress looks to be in good condition and could possibly be worn today.*

- **Why do you think the object looks the way it does?**

*The Short Dress looks like it is supposed to be fashionable and functional at the same time. It has decorative pleats and a bow, and the fabric has a decorative pattern woven into it too. Fashion of the time period it comes from likely influenced the way it is decorated. The loose fit of the Short Dress may be related to its function.*

- **What symbols, if any, do you see? What might they mean?**

*The cut of the Short Dress could be a symbol of status for the woman who may have worn it. Short Dresses allowed women to wear pants during a time when women were expected to wear dresses. The act of wearing pants with a shortened dress would have been unusual for its time.*

- **What story does this object have to share? (Where has it been? What has it seen? Who used it and for what purpose?)**

*According to the gallery description, this Short Dress was worn by a woman living in the radical utopian society of the Oneida Community of New York, where “relative equality for women” was the social norm. This Short Dress likely saw both manual labor and leisure activities, thanks to its comfortable and loose-fitting design.*

- **What does this object tell us about the time and place in which it was made and used?**

*This Short Dress tells us about a time when fashion for women was restricted to social expectation. The Short Dress was a style that challenged gender roles in 19th-century America, since women were not normally permitted to wear pants or live as relative equals to men.*

- **What do you like most about this object?**

*What I like the most about the Short Dress is the story it carries about the Oneida Community. It is a symbol of 19th-century women’s empowerment.*

- **What prompted you to select it?**

*I selected the Short Dress because the style reminded me of comfortable clothing I might wear in everyday life.*

- **What more would you like to know about this object?**

*I would like to know what earlier fashions might have inspired the design of this Short Dress and how the Short Dress design may have also inspired later fashion for women.*

- **How might you find out more?**

*I might find out more about Short Dresses or the Oneida Community using resources found in local libraries or the internet, such as electronic and hard copy encyclopedias, historical society websites, and popular internet search engines.*

- Reflect on the process with students and then prompt them to work independently in the manner you demonstrated.
- Distribute the **Worksheet One: View and Respond** worksheets. Students may work alone or with others to select and investigate objects in the collection. Suggest that they begin with the

Textiles gallery since textiles are most likely to be immediately relatable to their own experiences. Then, using the worksheets provided, have students select one object from each of the other galleries to view and consider.

- Have students meet in groups to share their thoughts about at least one of the objects they selected to view and respond to.
- Suggest that students dig deeper to consider the makers and manufacturers of at least one of their selected objects, as well as the people who may have collected or used them. Ask them to consider the many points of view from which an object's story can be told.
- Invite students to reflect on and discuss personal experiences or stories that might have inspired their selection of objects. For instance, the selection of a quilt might be inspired by a quilt that a student may have in their own home. The selection of a piece of pottery could be related to dinnerware a student may use on a regular basis. In any case, guide students toward discussing, writing about, or noting in some way any personal connections or stories they may have with the objects they have considered.
- Explain that the process of closely viewing, thinking about, and investigating the objects and then sharing their ideas with others prepares them for creating their own stories in which objects play important roles.

### **Investigate: Make Connections**

#### **Sessions 2 and 3: Plan a Historical Narrative**

- Using the responses generated during the investigation stage of the lesson, prompt students to create historical fiction narratives that weave together the stories of their selected objects along some sort of common thread. Explain that the stories must tie into American history in some way. As students plan their stories, have them determine point of view first. For example, will the story be told by the objects, by the makers or manufacturers, someone who uses the object, or by the collectors? Ask students if they know of stories in which objects play a significant role. You may wish to familiarize students with the following object-based stories:
  - *The Miraculous Journey of Edward Tulane* by Kate DiCamillo - In this story, a porcelain rabbit doll learns about the importance of love, loss, and life as it moves through the hands of many owners.
  - *The Hundred Dresses* by Eleanor Estes - An impoverished girl creates a set of drawings of imagined dresses. The story unfolds with these drawings taking center stage.

- *The Invention of Hugo Cabret* by Brian Selznick - A mysterious automaton (mechanical figure) is central to the adventures described in this story.
- *The Mixed-Up Files of Mrs. Basil E. Frankweiler* by E. L. Konigsburg - A statue thought to be by Michelangelo is the obsession of two children who hide out in the museum while trying to uncover its secrets.
- *The Magic Tree House* series by Mary Pope Osborne - An object or a book in a tree house is the springboard for a story that transports children through time.
- Invite students to create a storyboard. Distribute **Worksheet Two: Storyboarding**. Guide the students in creating visual storyboards to organize the events of their history-based plots. As they create their storyboards, ask students whether their stories are told from the perspective of the objects, the collectors, or the makers or manufacturers. They should consider how the objects are connected and how they are introduced into the stories.  
Some questions to guide student thinking and planning might include:
  - **Where and when will your story take place?**
  - **Who are the main characters and what point of view do they take??**
  - **How will you connect your characters, setting, and plot to American history?**
  - **How does the story begin, what happens over the course of the plot, and how does the story end?**

## Reflect and Refine

### Sessions 4 and 5: Tell Your Story in a Chosen Form

- Introduce the idea of creating a story using a format of their choosing. Students may choose to write their story in traditional story form, creating a first draft and then refining it into a final version. Some students may prefer alternative ways of telling the story they imagine. Offering options that align to different intelligence types might prove encouraging to some students who may be reluctant to write (e.g. visual, kinesthetic, musical, mathematical, naturalistic, interpersonal, intrapersonal). The final version of the story can be open-ended and does not necessarily need to be a formally written narrative.
- A multiple intelligence aligned approach could include any of the following choices:
  - **Visual-Spatial:** Create a storyboard, poster, or comic book page that tells the story of your historical objects with pictures. Some writing can be included in cases when the image doesn't fully show what might be happening at any point in the story.

- **Bodily-Kinesthetic:** Write a script for a pantomime or play that could be acted out.
  - **Musical-Auditory:** Compose a song that tells the story of your objects or alternatively, record a soundtrack that matches scenes shown in your preliminary storyboard.
  - **Logical-Mathematical:** Create a timeline or flowchart showing your story’s sequence. As an option, you could include “if-then” components that show decision points in the narrative.
  - **Naturalistic:** Reimagine the object-based story with animals, weather, or plants as characters.
  - **Interpersonal:** Join in a group storytelling circle where participants take turns adding to each other’s stories or participate in a peer feedback session where partners help expand each other’s ideas.
  - **Intrapersonal:** Write a journal response about how the story connects to your own experiences. Another option could be to record an audio diary spoken in the “voice” of the main character.
- Throughout the investigation and production stages of the lesson, prompt students to reflect upon the process with the following questions: How do objects prompt memories and stories? What can an object reveal about the people and culture from which it comes—how it came to be, where it has been, what purposes it has served, who cared for it, and so on? In what ways do people connect to objects through their own personal stories?
  - Have students consider in what ways their work in preparation for and creation of their historical narratives addresses these critical questions. Also have them consider what changes they might make in what they have created so that they might better affirm the following ideas:
    1. Objects can prompt memories and stories;
    2. An object might have its own story—how it came to be, where it has been, what purposes it has served, who has cared for it, and so on;
    3. People often connect to objects through their own personal stories.

## **Reflect and Assess**

### **Session 6: Self-Reflection and Self-Assessment**

- Once completed, have students self-assess by asking them to rate how well their stories:
  1. Demonstrate how objects can prompt memories and stories.

2. Show how their selected objects came to be, where they have been, what purposes they served, and who cared for them.
3. Connect to their own personal experiences through interrelation of historical and personal stories.

### **Additional Resources**

- Each of the featured objects comes from a museum that can be explored on its own. 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, click Online Learning, and then Exhibits from the drop-down menu: <https://decorativeartstrust.org>.
- Fountain, H. L. R. (2014). *Differentiated instruction in art*. Davis Publications.

### **Extensions**

- **Studio Experience:** To extend the lesson into a studio experience, prompt students to create diorama galleries of the artifacts included in their stories. To align to the original lesson objectives, students should continue to consider how objects prompt memories and stories as they plan the layout of their diorama galleries. Their historical fiction narratives should serve as contextual backdrops for their gallery plans. Students might wish to cut and paste small, printed images of their selected objects into their galleries or create actual, small-scale replicas of each object. Diorama galleries might be constructed as formal art gallery settings represented by basic box shapes or historic house museum settings represented by dollhouse-inspired shapes. In any case, encourage students to carefully consider how the physical appearance of their diorama galleries could enhance the telling of their historical fiction narratives. Students can be prompted further by having them write gallery tour scripts that convey their historical fiction narratives as public speeches or performances .

*The Educator Guide, Weaving a Storyline Across 250 Years (2025), was developed by Rhonda Tomel, Art Educator & Consultant, Half Moon Path Studio, under the direction of Dr. Marilyn Stewart, Professor Emerita of Art Education, Kutztown University of Pennsylvania, Kutztown, PA.*