



EDUCATOR GUIDE

Objects and Traditions: History Revealed

Lesson Overview

In this lesson, students explore a collection of objects, considering their meaning and significance within the context of American history, and noting the traditions within which the objects were made and used. Students consider objects through the lens of tradition using the 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 fifty states and the District of Columbia.

To become better familiar with the idea of traditions, students share and discuss some that are important in their own families and communities. Guided by the teacher, students first examine two quilts and discuss how they might be made in association with traditions. They then carefully consider other quilts in the **Collecting250** Textiles gallery, noting the traditions with which they might be associated. Finally, they turn their attention toward the many different objects in the various galleries, choosing two or three to examine while considering traditions. As students investigate objects, they discuss how cultural beliefs, values, and artistic expression influence the making of an object. The students also explore how the objects connect to or tell the story of 250 years of American history. Finally, students have several options from which to choose to demonstrate their new understandings of how objects, seen through the lens of tradition, provide insights into their social, cultural, and historical contexts.

Grade Levels: 8–12

Estimated Time: Five to 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 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.

Key Concepts

- Handcrafted and manufactured objects are rooted in the cultural identity of a community, reflecting its history, beliefs, and values.
- Objects are created and used within family, community, historical and/or artistic traditions.
- Investigating objects and their traditions can teach us about the people who made and/or used them and the time and place in which they were made and/or used.
- Investigating objects can help us understand how they continue or break with traditions.

Critical Questions

- What can an object tell us about a community's history, beliefs, and values?
- What can objects tell us about the people who made and/or used them and the time and place in which they were made and/or used?
- How are objects made and used within traditions?
- When does an object continue a tradition? How might an object break with tradition?

Objectives

The students will:

- Understand how objects reflect cultural beliefs, values, and historical narratives.
- Investigate how objects are created within family, community, historical, and/or artistic traditions.
- Engage in an investigative activity of their choosing to demonstrate understanding of how objects, seen through the lens of tradition, provide insights into social, cultural, and historical contexts.

Vocabulary

Tradition, values, narrative, community

Interdisciplinary Connections

- **History/Social Studies:** Students will have opportunities to practice historical thinking, considering a variety of objects and their place in history, noting cause and effect over time.
- **Language Arts:** As they engage in small and large group analysis and interpretation of objects and their place in time and place, students will have opportunities to practice language arts skills in listening, reading, writing, and speaking. They will engage in critical thinking, constructing and critiquing arguments for positions they take within those contexts

National Standards for Visual Arts Education

- Anchor Standard #2, CREATING: Organize and develop artistic ideas and work.
- Anchor Standard #4, PRESENTING: Select, analyze, and interpret artistic work for presentation.
- Anchor Standard #8, RESPONDING: Interpret intent and meaning in artistic work.
- Anchor Standard #11, CONNECTING: Relate artistic ideas and works with societal, cultural and historical context to deepen understanding.

Resources and Materials for Teaching

- **Collecting 250 website** <https://collecting250.com>
- Printed images of two quilts: *Quilt* from Winchester, Virginia, by Amelia Lauck (1822) and *Quilt*, from Carroll County, Maryland, by Sarah Jane Bower (1842-1920).
- Printed images of the additional 17 quilts in the Collecting250 Textiles gallery. Alternatively, students may view the images and information on devices.
- **Two Quilts: Compare and Contrast Discussion Guide**
- **Thinking About Quilts and Traditions Handout**
- **Objects and Traditions Handout**
- **Materials for Quilt Design**
 - A variety of papers and fabric
 - Pencils, pens, markers
 - Sketchbooks
 - Tools for cutting fabric and paper
 - Stick glue and white glue

Additional Resources

You may wish to:

- 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.
- Display the vocabulary words on posters or white board.
- Gather examples of objects, both vintage and contemporary, to provide inspiration for student work.

INSTRUCTIONAL STRATEGIES

Investigate: Engage and Explore

Session/Day 1 (45-minute period)

Tell students they will be investigating **Collecting250**, then share the Background Information (above). Let students 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. while others were imported for use in the U.S. Share with students that they will investigate the collection of objects, considering how they were made and used within various traditions as well as what they tell us about the past.

1. Explore traditions.

- Invite students to describe something they do with their family that is a tradition. For example, a family might have a tradition of ordering pizza on Friday nights, a tradition of visiting family graves on Memorial Day, or hanging stockings for Christmas. People tend to have traditions associated with special days—holidays and birthdays, for example.
- Have students raise their hand if they have a family tradition of celebrating birthdays with a cake and candles. What are some other birthday traditions? Raise your hand if you have a family tradition of taking pictures on the first day of school.

- Encourage students to share other family traditions. Ask them if there are specific objects associated with these traditions.
- Invite students to discuss traditions associated with their school or broader community. They might discuss High School Homecoming or Prom traditions, for example, or the local community Fourth of July parade. Reflect on how long some of these traditions have been in place.
- Explain that a tradition is a practice or custom, usually connected to beliefs or values, passed down through generations within a specific community. Traditions help shape a family or community identity and foster a sense of belonging and continuity. In addition to family and community, traditions can be associated with religion.
- Students should understand that there are times when people decide to change a tradition. This might be a slight change or a more dramatic change. Have students consider the following questions concerning breaking with tradition.
 - Are there some traditions that you no longer follow? Why?
 - Have you and your family, school, or local community ever slightly or greatly changed a tradition? If so, what led to the change?
 - Why might people decide to make changes in, or break from a family or community tradition?

2. Explore Quilts and Tradition

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. Remind them that as they explore the objects in the collection they will be asked to consider these objects in relationship to traditions.

Explain that traditions guide the making and use of objects in our world. Tell students that the objects they will encounter in **Collecting250** are tied to various traditions. Makers (or manufacturers) often use traditional *materials* and *processes* to make an object. The *appearance* of an object often is tied to tradition. There are traditional *uses* for objects as well.

What is a quilt?

- Explain that they will first focus on one kind of object in the collection—quilts—to explore the idea of traditions and objects from history.
- Enter the **Collecting250** site and go to the Textiles Gallery. As you slowly scroll down through this section to the end, point out the many quilts in the collection.
- Invite students to share what they know about quilts. Make sure they understand that a quilt is a type of bed covering—a multi-layered textile made of a top, a middle layer called batting, and a fabric backing. The layers are stitched together, sometimes using very tiny stitches following a decorative pattern.
- Have students speculate about the history of quilting. Guide the discussion so that students understand that the technique of quilting dates back thousands of years. Share that for most of their history, quilts were a practical necessity for warmth and protection. Some of the earliest quilting even was used to create protective armor for soldiers.

Close-up View of Two Quilts

- Have students view carefully and discuss two quilts from the Collection: *Quilt* from Winchester, Virginia, by Amelia Lauck (1822) and *Quilt*, from Carroll County, Maryland, by Sarah Jane Bower (1842–1920).
- You may wish to have students work in small groups as they look carefully at the two quilts and discuss their similarities and differences.
- Position the images of the two quilts side by side on the board or a screen so the class can see both. Alternatively, or in addition, provide each group with printed images of each of the two quilts.
- Share with students the names of the makers, the dates of creation, where the quilt was made and where it is now located.
- Have students describe each quilt, noting the colors, shapes, and organization of the various components. Zoom in to see the fabric used in each and have students describe what they see. Ask: How are the arrangements similar? How are they different?
- Have them note recognizable subject matter, such as stars, flowers, birds, leaves, and others.
- Suggest that they compare the stitching in each quilt, noting similarities, if any, and differences.
- Invite students to speculate how each quilt was made.
- Have them speculate why each was made, what purpose it was intended to serve.
- If they were going to give the quilts names, what name would they assign to each? Why?

Quilts, History, and Tradition

Distribute the **Two Quilts: Compare and Contrast** Discussion Guide and the **Thinking About Quilts and Traditions** Handout.

- Have students read the background information included on the **Collecting250** page for each of the two quilts and then discuss the following in their small groups:
 1. What do we know about the makers?
 2. What was the intended purpose of each quilt?
 3. What kind of quilt is A? What kind of quilt is B?
 4. Given what we know about the makers and the reasons why the quilts were made, speculate about what they might tell us about the time in which they were made. What might be revealed about the roles of women at that time? What might be revealed about what was important to the people living at that time? What, if anything, might they tell us about what was happening in the United States at this time?
 5. Given what you know about quilting, how does each of these objects fit within the tradition of quilting?
 6. Refer to the handout: **Thinking About Quilts and Traditions**. Review the list and ask: Of which traditions might this quilt (A or B) be a part? Discuss with your group. What additional information might you need to address this question? How might you discover what you need to know? Note that it might be useful for students to consider an alternate question: With which traditions is this quilt (A or B) NOT associated? Why do you think this?

- Invite groups to share with the whole class one take-away from their group discussion. Ask: What do you know now that you didn't know before you considered the quilts and traditions?

Session/Day 2 (45-minute period)

Quilts that Continue and Break with Tradition

In this activity, students find out more about some of the other quilts in the collection. In addition to the two quilts considered above, there are 17 quilts in the Textiles gallery of **Collecting250**. Have students work in small groups to think about the traditions associated with some of these other quilts.

- Distribute images and information about the remaining quilts from the Textiles gallery, providing each group with 2–3 images. Alternatively, students may view images and information on their devices. Remind students that they will use the **Thinking About Quilts and Traditions** Handout.
- Have students use images of each additional quilt, available information about it, and the **Thinking About Quilt Traditions** Handout, to determine the ways in which this additional quilt continues and/or breaks with traditions they attributed to the two quilts previously investigated (Quilt from Winchester, Virginia, by Amelia Lauck and Quilt, from Carroll County, Maryland, by Sarah Jane Bower).
- For each image, have students ask, “In what ways is this quilt part of the tradition associated with the two quilts studied earlier?” and “How does this quilt break with the traditions of the two quilts studied earlier?”
- Students may opt to record their findings in the form of a concept map or web, showing the connections among the quilts and the various traditions that they break with or continue.
- Have students share their findings with the class. Suggest that students judge which of the quilts investigated most dramatically breaks with quilt making traditions. Make sure to require reasons for their judgments.
- Finally, to wrap up the close investigation of quilts in **Collecting250**, have students contribute to a list of new understandings about life in and history of the United States.
 - What have we learned about aspects of American history?
 - What have these quilts told us about our history?

Session/Day 3 (45-minute period)

3. Explore Historical Objects and their Traditions

Distribute the **Objects and Traditions** Handout.

Explain that the “deep dive” into quilts and traditions has prepared students to learn about other handcrafted or manufactured objects in the world and how those objects are associated with various traditions. They can begin with an exploration of the **Connecting250** site, and the many objects featured there.

Remind students of the different galleries. Suggest that they work with one or more partners to explore the galleries, looking for at least three objects that they would like to know more about.

Refer to the **Objects and Traditions** Handout that lists traditions with which objects might be associated. Provide the following directions:

- Scroll through the galleries and identify the objects you wish to further explore.
- Click on the object to open its webpage, read about it, and discuss the object considering possible traditions with which it might be associated.
- For each chosen object, record the following:
 - This object is _____.
 - It falls within the tradition(s) of _____.
 - From what we can tell, it continues/breaks with the tradition.
 - We believe this because _____.
 - From our exploration of this object, we have learned the following about American life at another time in history: _____.

Session/Day 4 and 5 (two 45-minute periods)

Investigate: Make Connections

Connecting with Objects, Traditions, and History

Provide students several options from which to choose to demonstrate their understanding of how objects, seen through the lens of tradition, provide insights into their social, cultural, and historical contexts. Students may choose from among the following activities:

- **Quilt Design:** a visual art studio experience in which students design a quilt that follows and/or breaks with tradition and reflects something about their own time and place.
Have students review the quilts in the Textiles gallery on **Collection250**. Review traditions in quilt making as well. Based on discussions about quilts and traditions, students will create a quilt design that continues or breaks with one of the many quilt traditions considered throughout the lesson. In designing their quilt, students should consider how the design will convey something about the time and place in which they live. It may draw from their heritage, community, and/or a special historical event.

Review quilts and quilt traditions

- Have students recall various traditions that they encountered when they investigated quilts in the Textiles gallery of **Collecting250**.
- Invite them to describe differences in overall composition, recalling the medallion and album quilt designs in the first quilts discussed, and then note other ways of organizing the shapes and/or images to create an overall design.
- Provide images of quilts from other sources, noting traditional patterns, colors, and techniques, along with intended uses for quilts.

Conceptualize & plan (45-minute period)

- **Sketch and Plan:** Students should start by creating thumbnail sketches, then progress to color sketches to plan the composition and color palette.

- **Geometric vs. narrative:** Students can choose to create a traditional geometric quilt pattern or a more abstract/narrative quilt, potentially exploring themes like friendship, personal history, or community identity.
- **Choice:** Encourage students to choose to create a quilt design that continues or breaks with tradition.
- **Relevance to Time and Place:** Make sure students consider how their quilt design will convey something about the time and place in which they live. Remind them that they may draw from their heritage, community, and/or a special historical event. Invite them to think creatively about how to communicate this connection.

Explore materials

- **Paper-based projects:** Use construction paper, magazines, or newsprint for students to cut and arrange, exploring patterns and color relationships, surface design and traditions in quilt making.
 - **Mixed-media:** Suggest a collage using mixed media, including fabric and embroidery, to create a quilt design.
 - **Digital:** Use computers and a design program to create a quilt design.
- **Deep Dive:** Students choose one object to investigate in depth and report findings in the form of a handmade or digital book, poster, or slide presentation.

Select one object and research more about the maker, materials and processes used to make it, the traditions that the object continues and/or breaks with, its location or community of people with which it has been associated, and what it reveals about the American story. Present your findings in a handmade book, a poster, a digital slide presentation, video, digital book, or another format using platforms such as Canva or PowerPoint.

- **Compare and Contrast:** Students create a Venn Diagram to record similarities and differences between two chosen objects and then create a poem using a poetic form of their choice.
 - Select two similar objects and, using a Venn Diagram or another graphic organizer, describe how they are similar and different. In the Left Circle, list descriptors of one of your chosen objects that is not shared with the other object. In the Right Circle, list descriptors of the other chosen object. In the overlapping section, list those characteristics that are shared.
 - Create a poem using what you have listed in the Venn Diagram. For your descriptors, try to use figurative language, such as simile, metaphor, and personification. For example, to use the simile, you might write, “the surface is like a shiny red apple.” For metaphor, “The teapot dances to the rhythm of black and white dots.” For personification, “The plush surface calls out and begs for a cuddle.”
 - If possible, read your poem for others. Display your diagram and poem, along with images of your chosen objects.
- **Investigate Regional Styles and Stories:** Students investigate three objects from the same

region of the country and report their findings in the form of a handmade or digital book, poster, or slide presentation.

Select two or three objects from one area and, after carefully investigating these objects, describe how their styles and stories reflect that area's history. Create a presentation that includes maps, diagrams, photographs, and other related documents and/or imagery. Use digital tools such as Canva or PowerPoint to create and present your work.

- **Time Warp:** Students select three objects from different times in history, researching materials, tools, and techniques of each era and presenting their findings in the form of a handmade or digital book, poster, or slide presentation.

Select three objects of the same material from different time periods and research how the artisans may have used materials, tools, and techniques differently due to technologies and other influences. Present your findings in a handmade book, a poster, a digital slide presentation, video, digital book, or another format using platforms such as Canva or PowerPoint.

Session/Day 6 (45-minute period)

Reflect and Refine

Provide opportunities for students to reflect upon and refine their work, whether it be the Quilt Design, Deep Dive, Compare and Contrast, Regional Styles and Stories or Time Warp. Suggest that they pause after working for a short while and consider where they are in the project, asking what changes, if any, they ought to make, and where they will go from this point in the process.

Reflect and Present

Remind students that they have chosen a way to demonstrate their understanding of how objects, seen through the lens of tradition, provide insights into social, cultural, and historical contexts.

- **Discuss the process:** Facilitate a discussion about the ways students chose to demonstrate their understanding, whether they created a quilt design, engaged in a deep dive investigation, selected two objects for comparison and inspiration for a poem, considered objects from a particular geographic region, or made connections between objects and technologies of three different time periods. Ask students to speculate how their quilts, individually and all together, “tell a story about America.”
- **Create an Artist/Author Statement:** Guide students to create a statement about their completed work, including a description of the completed project, an explanation of the process involved, and an explanation about what they intended to convey. In their discussion of the completed work, suggest that they revisit ideas such as the following:
 - How objects reflect the time and place in which they were made and used.
 - What is meant by a tradition. Why traditions are important.
 - How objects are created and used within traditions.
 - How an object might be made using traditional or non-traditional materials and techniques.

- **Presentation and display:** Discuss with students how they might share their work with a broader community. How might they showcase their work within the school? Might they use the school's website to share their finished projects? How might they take their work to an even larger community; for example, in newspaper articles about the project, community celebrations, or displays at a local library or community center?

Assess

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

- Understands how objects reflect cultural beliefs, values, and historical narratives.
- Understands how objects are created within family, community, historical, and/or artistic traditions.
- Engaged in an investigative activity of their choosing to demonstrate understanding of how objects, seen through the lens of tradition, provide insights into social, cultural, and historical contexts.

Extensions

- Each of the featured objects comes from a museum that can be explored. You can also use the map at the bottom of the **Collecting 250** home page to find one in your state.
- **The Decorative Arts Trust** has a wealth of online exhibits in addition to **Collecting250**. Each exhibit could provide inspiration for a lesson. Go to the Trust's website (www.decorativeartstrust.org), click Online Learning, and then Exhibits from the dropdown menu.
- Explore objects in everyday life such as in your family or community and investigate how they continue a tradition and connect to American history.
- Traditions can encompass community building, creating memories, cultural preservation, sense of belonging, markers of identity, shared values and various forms of artistic expression. Write a story about a family tradition that you continue.

The Educator Guide, Objects and Traditions: History Revealed (2025), was developed by Dr. Anne G. Wolcott, Fine Arts Coordinator (retired), Virginia Beach City Public Schools, Virginia Beach, VA, and Dr. Marilyn Stewart, under the direction of Dr. Marilyn Stewart, Professor Emerita of Art Education, Kutztown University of Pennsylvania, Kutztown, PA.