

## Looking at Artifacts, Thinking About History

Steven Lubar and Kathleen Kendrick

### **1. Artifacts tell their own stories.**

“Looking at the artifact helps answer questions about its own history. What is it? When was it made? Where is it from? What is it made of? Who made it? How was it used? These kinds of questions establish basic information about the object; they help to identify and locate it in time and place.”

### **2. Artifacts connect people.**

“A second way of using artifacts is to look beyond the artifact to see how it tells us about people. To look beyond the artifact is to find stories about the object's role in people's lives: not just who made it and who it belonged to, but also the meanings it held to different individuals and the relationships it was part of. If we look at an artifact as something that people owned and used, we can find out interesting things about people by looking at things as they are made, used, and passed on, artifacts create a web of relationships.”

### **3. Artifacts mean many things.**

“Artifacts are more than just material things. They communicate ideas, symbolize values, and convey emotions. When we consider meaning, value, and significance, we are in the domain of cultural history. Different artifacts mean different things to different people, and those meanings change over time.”

### **4. Artifacts capture moments.**

“A fourth way of looking at an artifact is to think about its place in history. Artifacts are time capsules. They embody the tastes and values of an era. They mark a stage of technological evolution. They evoke memories of a specific time and place. Different objects, from different times, look different, and were used differently. Objects can tell us something of their times.”

### **5. Artifacts reflect changes.**

“Times change; history is the story of those changes. An artifact, or a collection of artifacts, can reflect change over time. Artifacts change as our society and culture change; artifacts nudge these changes along; and artifacts themselves change over time. Artifacts reflect changes, and sometimes cause change. They allow us opportunities to consider how and why society and culture change over time.”

These excerpts are from:

<http://www.smithsonianeducation.org/idealabs/ap/essays/looking.htm>

Read the entire essay by Steven Lubar and Kathleen Kendrick at the site.