

# Examining Material Culture to Bring Ancient History to Life

Daniella K. Garran

Middle school students are a tough audience, to say the least, as anyone who has spent a single class period with them will attest. Teachers had better be prepared not only to educate but also to engage. Creating a hook or lead-in that is intriguing as well as relevant to a lesson can be challenging. This is, of course, compounded by the emphasis placed on standards correlation and high stakes test preparation. However, regardless of the time period or culture being studied, teachers can find an array of hooks through an examination of the “stuff” made and used by people throughout history—the material culture.

As Janice Tauer Wass notes, “By studying material culture we can learn much about human behavior, creativity, and the impact of economic, environmental, and technological forces on the common man.”<sup>1</sup> The study of material culture is complex and can open students’ eyes to a variety of fields related to making sense of history. It involves anthropologists, archaeologists, sociologists, psychologists, geographers, museologists, historians, and art historians.<sup>2</sup> Objects must be identified, classified, analyzed and interpreted, all of which can be done by students.<sup>3</sup> Helping students to understand that learning about history involves more than just books and documents—that it can involve advanced technology like LiDAR to discover and map sites—and that our understanding of it is ever changing, based on current research in many different fields, may help engage reluctant learners or those with little previous interest in the subject matter.

Material culture has been an integral part of history since early humans roamed the Earth. The earliest manmade objects included flint tools, bifacial points, scrapers and ax heads from the Stone Age. As humankind’s needs evolved, so, too, did that which they manufactured. Inhabitants of ancient societies created monumental architecture, statuary, and jewelry.



A student replica of Standing Ram, created with wood and paint. The original, from Ur, ca. 2450 BCE, resides in the Penn Museum in Philadelphia.

Succeeding civilizations produced religious icons, books, stained glass, coinage, tapestries, advanced weapons, and eventually cars, computers and smartphones. Perhaps most importantly, material culture reveals the stories of those who have been largely omitted from history books: everyday women and

ON THE COVER: A student replica of the Gate of Ishtar, the eighth gate to the inner city of Babylon (in present-day Iraq).  
(Photo courtesy of Daniella K. Garran)



This student replica of the Royal Game of Ur, part of the British Museum's collection, was made using wood and painted disks.



A student-created cylinder seal (see clay-covered soda can in top left corner) with clay impression.

children as well as those who were enslaved. In short, the fascinating story of humanity can be told through a study of what people made. This is innately appealing to students, especially when they are asked to consider the “stuff” that defines them and their daily lives.

Additionally, material culture provides information about human-environment interaction as well as cultural diffusion. Raw materials found in one culture’s archaeological record which are not indigenous to that region might indicate trade and the related interpersonal interactions that would have taken place to facilitate the brokering of a deal. For example, jewelry found in the Royal Graves at Ur, in southern Iraq, excavated by Sir Leonard Woolley in 1922, included lapis lazuli and carnelian adornment—materials that would have been imported from as far away as Afghanistan and India.

Material culture is also a reflection of the technology at the time. Students are amazed by historical people’s ingenuity, once they comprehend that technology is not simply something electronic, but rather any thing that makes life easier. Technology can be exported as easily as materials. Ancient people and cultures shared ideas, belief systems, and ways of doing things to make sense of and organize their world efficiently. These shifts are readily apparent in art and material culture.

Examining material culture is a perfect opportunity for structured inquiry-based learning. Considering items that previous cultures made and used on a daily basis can provide a fresh perspective on the past and engage students’ curiosity. Students may begin a material-culture-based inquiry simply by asking, “What is this and what was it used for?” Or they may choose to dive deeper by wondering how certain non-native materials

were obtained to make the objects; what the object symbolizes; or whether the object was a luxury or utilitarian item. Teachers can allocate class time to guide students in either independent or small group research. The National Archives artifact analysis sheet is a wonderful tool to begin with ([www.archives.gov/files/education/lessons/document-analysis/artifact-analysis-worksheet-novice.pdf](http://www.archives.gov/files/education/lessons/document-analysis/artifact-analysis-worksheet-novice.pdf), see worksheet 4). Students can use this information to begin writing their artifact analyses or as a basis for which to begin a discussion.

A study of artifacts also lends itself to developing students’ historical thinking skills. As NCSS’s C3 Framework notes, “Historical thinking requires understanding and evaluating change and continuity over time, and making appropriate use of historical evidence in answering questions and developing arguments about the past.”<sup>4</sup> Relevant history indicators for the C3 Framework’s Dimension 2 (Applying Disciplinary Concepts and Tools)—Change, Continuity and Context—are as follows:

- D2.His.9.6-8: “Classify the kinds of historical sources used in a secondary interpretation.”
- D2.His.10.6-8: “Detect possible limitations in the historical record based on evidence collected from different kinds of historical sources.”
- D2.His.11.6-8: “Use other historical sources to infer a plausible maker, date, place of origin, and intended audience for historical sources where this information is not easily identified.”
- D2.His.12.6-8: “Use questions generated about multiple historical sources to identify further areas of inquiry and additional sources.”





Using painted bricks mounted on wood, a seventh-grade student created this Striding Lion, based on Babylonian artifacts that lined the Processional Way (ceremonial walkway).

- D2.His.13.6-8: "Evaluate the relevancy and utility of a historical source based on information such as maker, date, place of origin, intended audience, and purpose."<sup>5</sup>

To foster a deeper understanding among my students of ancient civilizations, I developed two projects that explore the art and artifacts of Mesopotamians and Greeks. These projects engage students in authentic research, analytical and historical thinking, primary source analysis, and academic writing. I have the luxury of teaching in a project-rich school setting where this type of assignment is encouraged, however, these projects can be scaled back to be completed in class rather than out of school and can be narrowed in scope as desired. The handouts included in this article could be easily adapted to meet the needs of any history or social studies curriculum. The projects can also be easily adapted to meet the needs of any grade level and academic ability, and are suitable for ELL and special needs students, since the written portions can be modified to suit students' abilities.

In the Mesopotamian Museum Project, students write a brief summary of ancient Mesopotamia and the role that art played (see Handout 1). They then conduct research on a selection of artifacts, generate didactic labels (see Handout 2), and create a replica of one of the objects they researched. Students begin by selecting four artifacts which share a common theme of

the student's choosing, such as technology, jewelry, communication with the gods, agriculture, animals or record keeping. I provide exemplars and graphic organizers (Handouts 1 and 2), which give students a solid foundation on which to base their research and writing. Perhaps the most important guidance teachers can provide at the start of this project is a list of reliable websites and resources. The best collections of Mesopotamian art from which to choose objects and to find information include the Metropolitan Museum of Art; the British Museum; the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston; the University of Pennsylvania Art Museum; and the Oriental Institute at the University of Chicago. Each of these institutions has exceptional online resources for both educators and students. Although the sites presume an adult audience, teachers can read through a few examples with students to help them make sense of the content.

In addition, the Metropolitan Museum of Art boasts an incredible teaching resource—*Art of the Ancient Near East: A Resource for Educators*—which can be downloaded for free online ([www.metmuseum.org/learn/educators/curriculum-resources/the-art-of-the-ancient-near-east](http://www.metmuseum.org/learn/educators/curriculum-resources/the-art-of-the-ancient-near-east)).<sup>6</sup> Similar resources exist for Egyptian, Islamic, Greek, Medieval, African, Roman, Renaissance, Southeast Asian, and Korean art. Students can conduct online research of the Met's collection of Near Eastern Art to help them learn about each of the objects they choose for their project. Also available on the Met's website is the Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History ([www.metmuseum.org/toah/](http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/)) which provides insight into the different eras of art throughout the world. This project is also an excellent opportunity to collaborate with art educators who may be able to provide insight into the techniques used by ancient Mesopotamians or to help students create their replicas in class.

Upon completing their research and writing their didactics, students have the opportunity to engage in deeper historical thinking, particularly historical analysis and interpretation. Perhaps most significant is that students will come to understand that historical interpretation is always in flux and that the discovery of new sources and the way they are analyzed provides new ways of thinking about the past. One approach to this is to provide students with differentiating analyses of the same artifact which they must then confirm or refute based on their evidence and reasoning.

*continued on page 7*

# Introduction Graphic Organizer

<b>Paragraph 1: Background information about Mesopotamia</b>	
Location — geography, climate, location	
Dates	
Types of government	
Inventions, technology	
Resources, materials available	
Major accomplishments of the civilization	
<b>Paragraph 2: The importance of art in Mesopotamia</b>	
What can we learn about ancient Mesopotamian culture from their art?	
How does it show daily life of different groups of people?	
How does it show the importance of religion, writing, etc.?	
How is the subject matter important?	
<b>Paragraph 3: Theme for exhibit</b> Chosen theme (check one):	
<input type="checkbox"/> Mathematics and measurement <input type="checkbox"/> Role of women <input type="checkbox"/> Daily life <input type="checkbox"/> First cities <input type="checkbox"/> First farmers	<input type="checkbox"/> Invention of writing <input type="checkbox"/> Law and government <input type="checkbox"/> Literature <input type="checkbox"/> Religion <input type="checkbox"/> Science and inventions
	<input type="checkbox"/> Warfare <input type="checkbox"/> Animals <input type="checkbox"/> Rituals & ceremonies <input type="checkbox"/> Technology <input type="checkbox"/> Other _____
Background on why this is important in Mesopotamian culture and history	
Why were these objects chosen to exemplify this theme?	

# Didactic Graphic Organizer

Object Title	
Date Created	
Location Where It Was Made or Found	
Materials (What it's made of)	
Dimensions (Size)	
What was this object used for?	
Who would own/use this object?	
Choose an element of Mesopotamian civilization and explain how this object illustrates that aspect of their society.	
What does this object tell us about Mesopotamian culture and history?	
Website or source this information came from:	





A student created this Gate of Ishtar replica using homemade gingerbread and animal crackers on a wood panel.

#### EXAMINING MATERIAL CULTURE *from page 4*

The Greek Vase project is far less comprehensive but equally effective. Prior to assigning this project, students learn about the Attic vase painting done in ancient Greece. Black and red figure vase painting was a technique perfected between the sixth and fourth centuries B.C.E.<sup>7</sup> Using a potter's wheel, ancient Greek artists shaped a variety of different vessels, with form often following function. For example, kraters were used as mixing vessels; rhytons and kylixes for drinking wine; and amphorae for storage. The three-stage firing process allowed artisans to increase or reduce the amount of oxygen in the kiln, thus resulting in either red or black figures, depending on which parts of the pot had been glazed. While these processes demonstrate significant advances in the history of making art, what was depicted on the vases is of utmost importance—the detailed scenes give scholars and students a close look into the daily lives and beliefs of ancient Greeks.

First, students conduct some basic research and synthesize it with what has been covered in class and in their homework. Next, they answer the following questions which help prepare them for their essay:

- When and why did the Greeks first start making vases?
- What influenced the Greeks' vase designs?
- How did Greek vase designs change over time? Consider style and subject matter.



Seventh-grade students used paint and markers on terra cotta pots to depict aspects of ancient Greek life.

- What can we learn about ancient Greek culture from looking at vases?
- What were some of the different shapes of vases and what were they used for? Why did they have so many different styles of vases?

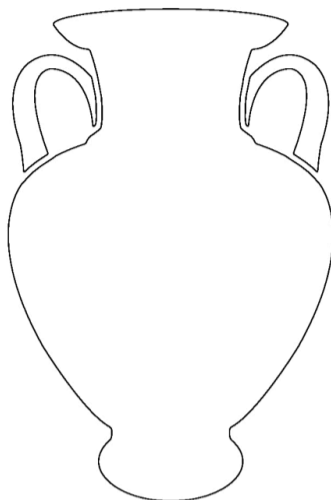
Then, students select an aspect of ancient Greek history and culture that they would like to learn more about. This project provides a wonderful opportunity for students to pursue their interests in history. I offer a range of broad topics for students to research and depict on their vases as well as more specific sub-topics to help them narrow their research. One topic I have found to be popular is athletics, with sub-topics being the Olympics, specific ancient Greek Olympic events, the Isthmian Games, and the Heraean Games. Religion and mythology are always popular research topics and can be made more specific by narrowing the research to specific deities, religious festivals, or myths. Some students find topics within the category of daily life to be interesting and have focused on the role of women, aspects of citizenship, and even philosophy. Lastly, many students are interested in learning more about ancient Greek warfare and choose to focus on particular battles, wars, military equipment and formations, or generals.

Once students have chosen their topics, they conduct research and write a short analytical essay. This part of the assignment can be difficult to scaffold since students are choosing topics

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# Greek vase template

HANDOUT 3



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# Artifact Analysis Sheet\*

HANDOUT 4

## Analyze an Artifact or Object



### Meet the Artifact.

What do you think it is?

### Observe its parts.

What do you think the object is made out of? Circle all that apply.



How do you think the object feels?  
Circle all that apply.



What is the color of the object?

What is the shape of the object?

What size is the object?



What are three words that describe the object?

### Try to make sense of it.

What do you think the object was used for?

Who do you think would have used the object?

What does the object tell us about the time period when it was made and used?

Do we still use this object today? If so, how is it different?

### Use it as historical evidence.

Where do you think you could find out more information about the object or the people who used it?



\* National Archives and Record Administration. (n.d.). Analyze an Artifact or Object, [www.archives.gov/files/education/lessons/document-analysis/artifact-analysis-worksheet-novice.pdf](https://www.archives.gov/files/education/lessons/document-analysis/artifact-analysis-worksheet-novice.pdf)



individually, but overarching themes and questions are relevant no matter the topic. Examples of such questions include, “How does this aspect of Greek culture reflect Greek beliefs and values?” or “How was this theme depicted in other examples of Greek art or vase painting?” Students must then plan out a scene for their very own vase. Some students choose to make their vase from scratch with air-dry clay, while others simply use a terracotta flowerpot or vase. For those who do not have access to such materials, or do not want to ask parents to provide a pot or vase, students can depict their design on paper (see Handout 3).

Upon completion of their research, students’ learning may be extended to include a document analysis to support the claim that they make in their writing. For example, if students choose to research the Olympics and to depict a specific event on their vase, they can then turn to the writing of Pausanias to confirm their interpretation and visual rendering of the event. This helps promote historical thinking and analysis since students must determine the veracity of the written account.

There are many opportunities for professional collaboration with the Greek vase project. Art teachers and Language Arts teachers can become involved with the creation of the vases and with the essay assignment. Other classes can view the vases as part of a gallery walk with the student artists present to answer questions about their chosen themes, or a gallery guide can be created for self-guided tours. A digital gallery could also be created and posted online for friends and families to view.

Inquiry-driven research into materials created by past cultures can be applied to any time period and any culture. For example, examining the Underground Railroad quilt codes provides an unparalleled opportunity to explore through inquiry and artifact analysis what messages were being given to fugitives from slavery. This approach also allows students to engage with the most recent scholarship on the topic which questions some long-held interpretations of the codes.<sup>7</sup> (<https://folklife.si.edu/magazine/underground-railroad-quilt-codes>)

Another example of material culture analysis is relevant for students studying geography. Since understanding human-environment interaction is an essential theme, students may begin by inquiring about what tools humans used to adapt to

their environment in different parts of the world. An examination of tools and technology from different climates and regions would provide students with the knowledge needed to engage in historical thinking about Global Interconnections, in particular D2.Geo.10.6-8 from the C3 Frameworks, which suggests that students will “analyze the ways in which cultural and environmental characteristics vary among various regions of the world.”<sup>8</sup>

If time is a big concern in your classroom, consider choosing one or two objects to highlight in your lessons. There are outstanding resources on museum websites and Google Arts and Culture which can no doubt enhance students’ understanding of history, allow them to practice inquiry, and to further hone their historical thinking skills. No matter the culture or time period, an examination of material culture provides essential insights into the minds of the people as well as their daily activities and practices in a way that written accounts simply cannot. ■

#### Notes

1. J. T. Wass, “Teaching History with Material Culture,” *Illinois History Teacher* 5, no. 2 (1998): 1–4.
2. *Ibid.*, 1.
3. *Ibid.*
4. National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS), *The College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework for Social Studies State Standards: Guidance for Enhancing the Rigor of K-12 Civics, Economics, Geography, and History* (Silver Spring, MD: NCSS, 2013), [www.socialstudies.org/system/files/2022/c3-framework-for-social-studies-rev0617.2.pdf](http://www.socialstudies.org/system/files/2022/c3-framework-for-social-studies-rev0617.2.pdf)
5. *Ibid.*, 48.
6. Kim Benzel et al., *Art of the Ancient Near East: A Resource for Educators*. Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2013: 45.
7. Department of Greek and Roman Art, “Athenian Vase Painting: Black-and Red-Figure Techniques,” in *Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History* (October 2002). New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2000–. [www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/vase/hd\\_vase.htm](http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/vase/hd_vase.htm).
8. M. C. Bryant, (2019, May 3). *Underground Railroad Quilt Codes: What We Know, What We Believe, and What Inspires Us*. Smithsonian Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage, from <https://folklife.si.edu/magazine/underground-railroad-quilt-codes>
9. NCSS, *The C3 Framework*, 44.



**DANIELLA K. GARRAN** has been a middle school social studies teacher on Cape Cod for over 20 years. She holds a B.A. in History and Art History from Connecticut College, an M.A. in Education and Museum Studies from Tufts University and a post-baccalaureate certificate in Archaeology from the University of Leicester. Daniella has been on archaeological digs in England and Bulgaria where she excavated ancient Roman ruins. She can be reached at [dkgarran@gmail.com](mailto:dkgarran@gmail.com).