

A GUIDE TO OBJECT BIOGRAPHY

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What is Object Biography?

An object biography recounts the life history of an item step-by-step from its creation through the present day, answering “Who? What? Where? When? How? Why?” for each step of an object’s journey. Object biography is a methodology that goes beyond provenance research to create close, contextual consideration of the shifting relationships of things and people as they circulate into and out of different social situations. No one period of a thing’s existence is prioritized over others. Multiple points of view are brought into dialogue with each other. The resulting biography clarifies the influence of things on people (their materiality and social agency) alongside the influence of people on things, as well as the representational or symbolic content of things. Object biography creates a linear narrative that is chronologically and spatially organized. Yet object biography also helps us to reveal how objects can be a-temporal or multi-temporal, as they exist on different time scales from individual human lives. This methodology illuminates the ways meanings and the value of things sometimes shift, sometimes persist across time and space. Any object is suited to a biographical approach. Some items are better documented than others, however, in which case research and comparative study can present plausible possibilities for its life experiences over time.

Guide to Writing an Object Biography

First, identify and describe your object.

Then, consider each phase in its life history, from making through the present day. These phases may include more or fewer than the following:

- Creation
- Use(s) in home community
- Discard or retirement in and/or
- Transfer out of home community
- Collection
- Acquisition by museum
- Use(s) by museum
- Present day.

For each of these stages, explain with as much detail and certainty as you can:

- WHO was involved?
- WHAT materials and skills did they use? WHAT was the object identified as and used for?
- WHERE did this life phase occur?
- WHEN did this life phase occur?
- HOW did the object influence them? HOW did they value, understand, or perceive the object?
- WHY did they value the object? Why did they create, use, discard, find, etc. this item?

Finally, reflect on what you have learned. What does this biographical story tell you about the ways the object influenced human actors over time and the various relationships in which it participated? What is clear or obscure about its history? What surprises did you discover? How did its value or meaning persist or change in different circumstances? How has your understanding of or valuation of the object been impacted by this exercise?

Further Reading

Appadurai, Arjun. "Introduction: Commodities and the Politics of Value." In *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*, edited by Arjun Appadurai, 3–63. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 1986.

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