

APPENDIX D:

Curator Interview Questions and Object Details

Curator Questions

For *The Curator and the Object* segment of each object lesson, the curators will be asked to respond to the following types of questions. Specific questions, however, will be shaped to the particular object, curator, and historical themes:

- When and why was the object collected?
- Did those who collected it believe it had a different historical value or meaning than we see today?
- Who created the object and who used it?
- What historical themes does the object reveal? Why is the object historically significant?
- What do you notice now in the object that you missed originally?
- What sources have you researched in order to understand its historical meaning?
- What does the object “conceal,” i.e., what collateral documents are needed to fully illuminate the object and its context?
- How would you present this artifact to the museum-going public?
- What other artifacts or graphics would you want to combine or juxtapose with it?
- What tips would you offer to students who are analyzing historical objects?
- What is the first thing you do when you try to analyze a historical artifact?

Proposed Objects

During Phase I of the project, planning and content development, the project staff will work with the Planning and Advisory Committee to select six of the following ten objects for production as object lessons. Below is a brief overview of the objects, the historical themes raised by them, their historical contexts, the collateral documents that might be used with them, and the curator(s) we would plan on working with.



1750 Silver Teapot

U.S. History Themes: Early American life; American revolution; consumer revolution

Object Detail: Tea Pot made by Samuel Casey for Abigail Robinson, Little Rest (later Kingston), Rhode Island, 1750s. The pot shows the engraved initials “A.R.” and the Robinson family ensign or crest. Abigail Robinson may have acquired the teapot around the time of her marriage, to John Wanton of Newport, in 1752.

Stylish tea pots and tea sets were symbols of wealth and status for their owners in the eighteenth century. Tea parties were an English custom that became the rage in the American colonies starting in the early 1700s. Members of elite social circles gathered

for tea in private parlors to display their refined manners and elegant clothing. They imitated English gentry fashions in appearance, manners, and social life. Their ideal was a life of “refinement,” set apart from their rough and ordinary neighbors. And they defined “success” as acquiring material symbols of wealth.

But such views competed with alternative ones that opposed class distinctions and emphasized the dignity of labor and the ideal of equality. Thus, not everyone tried to be refined in the eighteenth century. Many poorer and middling colonists sought a life of productive work, modest comfort, and freedom from debt. Their ideal was not refinement but pride in their skills and their contributions to the community.

These competing ideals of gentility and refinement versus equality and the dignity of labor came to a head during the American Revolution. In December of 1773, a mob of common men threw crates of tea into Boston harbor in what became known as the Boston Tea Party. At this revolutionary moment, American patriots banned elite tea parties and embraced the egalitarian values associated with the common people. This ideal was enshrined in the famous words of the Declaration of Independence: that “all men are created equal.” By juxtaposing luxury objects like tea pots with other documents and objects representing equality and the dignity of labor, we can learn some of the origins of the American Revolution through artifacts.

Curator: Barbara Clark Smith

Associated Objects: Artisan images; Leather apron; By Hammer and Hand all Arts Do Stand; Rum bottles; Tavern scene; tool with initials.



Sunstone from the Mormon Temple at Nauvoo, Illinois U.S.

History Themes: antebellum reform and religion

Object Detail: This one of twelve “sunstones” built as part of the Mormon temple at Nauvoo, Illinois in 1844. The engraved sun and heralding trumpets express the Mormon religion’s millennial hopes for the second coming of Christ.

Joseph Smith, prophet and founder of the Mormon religion, traveled west from upstate New York with a small band of followers in the 1820s. Soon after the Mormons settled in Illinois, their unorthodox beliefs met with hostility from other settlers in the area. Anti-Mormon violence culminated in the murder of Smith and his brother in 1844. A fire destroyed the temple. The Mormons

decided to move west. Led by Brigham Young, many Mormons left the bounds of the United States and settled along the rim of the Mexican republic, in what is Utah today.

The Mormons were only one of many groups that banded together in religious communities in the era before the Civil War. More than one hundred visionary communities—including Shakers, Owenites, and others—pursued cooperative and spiritual ways of life. Most of these communities held beliefs deriving from Protestant religious traditions. Many established alternatives to orthodox marriage and family living arrangements. Some questioned the institution of private property. All of them sought alternatives to the get-rich-quick and individualist ethos of nineteenth-century U.S. society. Study of the Sunstone and related artifacts illuminates the religious and reform ferment of antebellum America.

Curator: Richard Ahlborn (emeritus)

Associated Objects: image of the building of the temple; map of Mormon migration; excerpt from Joseph Smith's revelation account; accounts of the founding of the Shakers, the Owenites and utopian religious communities.



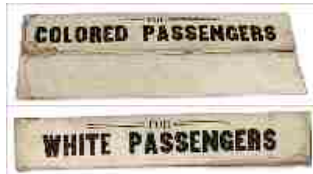
Mary Todd Lincoln dress made by ex-slave Elizabeth Keckley, 1861

U.S. History Themes: slavery; Civil War; consumer society

Object Detail: This dress belonged to First Lady Mary Todd Lincoln, who wore it at a White House event in 1862. It was probably made by Elizabeth Keckley, Mrs. Lincoln's favorite dressmaker. Like other working people, Keckley's experience took place largely behind the scenes. Keckley's sewing skills helped her buy her way out of slavery and become a fashionable dressmaker in Washington, D.C. In the late 1850s, she sewed for Mrs. Jefferson Davis, wife of the Mississippi senator who would soon serve as President of the Confederate States of America. During the Civil War, she became Mrs. Lincoln's confidant and supporter. In turn, she drew on Mrs. Lincoln's political connections to raise support for destitute African American refugees who had escaped to Washington from southern lines. This dress reflects the history of fashion and a First Lady's life in the social limelight. Behind the scenes, it tells the story of two nineteenth-century women who formed a close, unequal, and important relationship across the lines of race and class.

Curators: Lisa Kathleen Graddy; Barbara Clark Smith

Associated Objects: Excerpts from Keckley's autobiography, *Behind the Scenes, or Thirty Years a Slave, Four Years in the White House*.



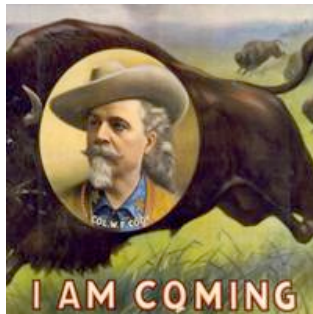
White/Colored Signs

U.S. History Themes: Jim Crow segregation and race relations

Object Detail: These simple, painted signs from North Carolina tell us of legal racial segregation, created late in the nineteenth century and practiced for more than half of the twentieth century in the states of the one-time Confederacy. They also remind us of the dramatic acts of resistance, by individuals and organizations, that brought the signs down and made them museum pieces rather than pieces of the American landscape.

Curators: David Shayt; Harry Rubenstein; Pete Daniel

Associated Objects: Excerpts from the *Plessy v. Ferguson* Supreme Court Ruling; personal accounts of Jim Crow era such as Anne Moody's *Coming of Age in Mississippi*, sample segregation laws.



Buffalo Bill Wild West Show Poster and Theodore Roosevelt's Chaps

U.S. History Themes: Western settlement and mythology and American Indians

Object Detail: American culture has often simplified the past, telling dramatic stories of “good guys and bad guys,” cowboys and Indians. This poster advertising Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show, an entertainment popular during the period 1883 - 1910, represents one of the many sources for these cultural characters. Dime novels of the 1890s, movies since the 1920s, radio shows of the 1930s, and TV programs since the 1950s—all have popularized mythic images of “the West.” Some have kept the simple stereotypes but reversed the roles, depicting Native Americans as the “good guys” and Euro-American settlers as the “bad guys.”



But when we look beyond the stereotypes, we see a history more complex and more significant. For example, “cowboys” were waged workers in the cattle industry that boomed in the West in the 1880 and 1890s. Cowboys were white, black, Mexican, and Native American, and they peopled the west alongside farmers, missionaries, ranchers, soldiers, prospectors, laborers, and others—some looking for jobs and a simple living, others for riches or profitable investment.

The category of “Indians” was also a complex one. Indians of the nineteenth-century West included a wide variety of peoples with

different languages and customs. Their interactions with the newcomers to their lands were many and varied. This complex history, which unfolds from a close look at key artifacts, is a source for the political, economic, and cultural conflicts that mark the Western U.S. today.

Curators: Richard Ahlborn (emeritus); David Shayt

Associated Objects: video clips from the Wild West show; excerpts from Teddy Roosevelt's autobiography; excerpts from Frederick Jackson Turner's *The Frontier in American History*, excerpts from the Dawes Act; images of Wounded Knee.



Ballot Box/The Acme Voting Machine

U.S. History Themes: Progressivism and political reform

Object Detail: In the late 1800s and early 1900s, the electorate of the United States roughly doubled. Immigrants flocked to the nation's cities, and women in the western territories received the right to vote. Election officials worried that such large numbers of votes would make voting fraud easier. They looked for a solution in the introduction of the Australian or blanket ballot and in new ballot counting machines.

The printing and distribution of blanket ballots, like the provision of mechanical ballot boxes, became functions of government rather than competing parties. Innovations in ballot box design were intended to insure an honest vote. The Acme, an improvement upon the open-slot box, has a tabulator activated by a lever mechanism that releases the ballot into the box. The Acme was manufactured in Bridgeport, Connecticut, about 1880.

Political manipulation and election fraud were often compared to a well-oiled machine. Reformers resolved to fight political machines with ballot reform and voting machines. But reformers also had their blind spots; their vision of "good government" often involved disenfranchising immigrant voters. The story of corruption and reform in voting—one with obvious contemporary resonance—can be "read" through the range of objects and documents associated with the political process in this era.

Curator: William L. Bird, Jr.

Associated Objects: Thomas Nast's "The Coming Crown," *Harper's Weekly*, May 15, 1880; 1888 New Hampshire Democratic ballot for Grover Cleveland; nineteenth century ballots from California; excerpts from William L. Riordon's *Plunkitt of Tammany Hall*.



Model T Ford Roadster, 1926

U.S. History Themes: labor, industrialization, and consumer culture

Object Detail: This 1926 Ford Model T Roadster has serial number 14,125,605. Ford Motor Company' ceased production of the Model T in 1927, and the last one was number 15,007,033. Ford's massive plants in suburban Detroit—the Highland Park and River Rouge facilities—began to mass produce cars on moving assembly lines in the 1910s. Contrary to popular myth, not all Model T's were alike: although the car was mass produced, consumers could choose between a number of different styles in any given year of production.

The Henry Ford Motor Company helped transform the nascent auto industry by changing the ways cars were built. In the early years of American automobile production, hundreds of companies made small numbers of cars. Prices were high, and the volume of cars produced by each company was small. When the Henry Ford Motor Company began using a moving assembly line in parts of the Highland Park factory in 1913, the company started to streamline the production process, and helped make the auto industry into a mass production industrial behemoth. The prices of automobiles fell dramatically, making them more affordable. In 1900, there were about 8,000 cars in the United States. By 1920, that number had risen to 8 million. The Model T provides one of the most resonant historical objects in U.S. history, touching on fundamental questions about labor, management, and consumer society.

Curator: Peter Liebhold

Associated Objects: Model T sales literature; "Henry's made a Lady out of Lizzie" poster advertising the Model A in 1928; Model T toolbox; accounts of labor strife at the Ford factory in River Rouge, Michigan.



NRA Eagles

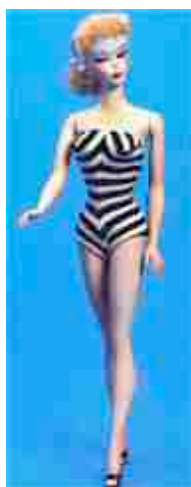
U.S. History Themes: New Deal, rise of nation state

Object Detail: The National Industrial Recovery Act was the first major piece of economic recovery legislation passed by Franklin Roosevelt's new administration in 1933. It allowed for the creation of industrial "codes" to regulate wages, working conditions, and prices at the depth of the Great Depression. Hugh Johnson, the head of the new National Recovery Administration (NRA) launched the program with a massive publicity campaign and awarded "blue eagles" to companies that participating in the code-writing process. Companies often displayed the blue eagles in their windows or on

their products as a way of appealing to consumers to purchase approved products as part of their patriotic duty. The objects and images not only teach us about a key piece of New Deal legislation, they also reveal one of the ways in which the federal government came to occupy a more central place in American life. Some of the same techniques of “selling” the State were used later in the 1930s and especially during World War II—an era of dramatic expansion of federal power.

Curator: Harry Rubenstein

Associated Objects: Excerpt of the NRA legislation; image of the NRA code; excerpt of the 1935 Supreme Court decision finding the NRA unconstitutional; New Deal era cartoons.



Barbie, Number 1, 1959

U.S. History Themes: Women and gender in the 1950s, consumer culture

Object Detail: Modeled on a German doll, which Ruth Handler bought for her daughter, Barbara, the first Barbie doll was introduced by Handler’s company, Mattel, at the New York Toy Fair in 1959. This first doll wore a black and white swimsuit and a ponytail. Subsequent dolls have sported fashion designed by top designers. This emphasis on fashion suggests that Barbie fits into a domestic containment ideology in which women were to express their sensuality within the safe space of traditional marriage. Young girls of the 1950s and early 1960s learned how to control and express their gender identity through playing with Barbie and the accessories that accompanied the doll. Ken, Barbie’s boyfriend, debuted in 1961. In the following years, Barbie gained a best friend and younger siblings. Mattel estimates that there are over 100,000 Barbie collectors today. Not all Barbie fans, however, absorbed the conservative gender ideology embodied in her statuesque frame. Thus, the era of Barbie encompassed (and can teach us about) the period of the “feminine mystique” and the powerful challenges to that ideology that emerged in the late 1960s and the 1970s.

Curators: Shelley Nickles; Bill Yeingst; Barbara Clark Smith

Associated Objects: excerpts from the 1959 “kitchen debate” between Richard Nixon and Nikita Khrushchev; “bomb shell” and “bomb shelter” cartoons from Civil Defense Preparedness Agency and Federal Civil Defense Administration pamphlets.



Woolworth lunch counter, Greensboro, NC

U.S. History Theme: civil rights

Object Detail: On February 1, 1960, four African-American college students sat down at a lunch counter at Woolworth's in Greensboro, North Carolina, and politely asked for service. Their request was refused. When asked to leave, they remained in their seats. Their passive resistance and peaceful sit-down demand helped ignite a youth-led movement to challenge racial inequality throughout the South. The sit-ins in North Carolina sparked similar actions throughout the South. In Nashville, Tennessee, a sit-in was organized by the future leaders of the Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). The young people who were SNCC fieldworkers participated in some of the most dangerous efforts to win civil rights for African Americans in the South during the mid-1960s. Close examination of this iconic artifact of the Civil Rights movement leads us to consider the forces encouraging and inhibiting racial change in 1950s and 1960s America.

Curators: Bill Yeingst; Harry Rubenstein

Associated Objects: images from the sit-ins; excerpts of personal narratives from civil rights activists; Martin Luther King's "Letter from a Birmingham Jail"; excerpts of the 1964 Voting Rights Act.