

We the People

Museum Collections

OVERVIEW

Theme Introduction

In this unit, our theme is “We the People.” What can museum collections tell us about what it means to be an American? What can we study and share to see how our rights and privileges have changed – or not – in 250 years? We’ll explore these questions and more.

Podcast Short

[Museum Collections](#) with Bob Genheimer, George Rieveschl Curator of Archaeology, and Maat Manninen, Registrar at Cincinnati Museum Center

Guiding Questions

As students listen to the podcast, invite them to consider the following questions:

- Why do museums collect objects? How do museums use objects?
- How do museums decide what to collect and preserve for the future?
- How might museums collect items from diverse perspectives to better represent history and communities?

Key Vocabulary

- **Registrar:** A person who manages museum collections by cataloging new acquisitions, tracking objects and helping preserve and store collections.
- **Curator:** A person who manages and researches a collection of artifacts, specimens or documents related to their area of expertise.
- **Accession and Deaccession:** The formal processes that museums use to accept and remove objects into or out of their permanent collections.
- **Cabinet of Curiosity:** An early collection of unusual, rare or valuable objects – both natural and man-made – displayed in a person’s home. A precursor to modern museums.
- **Artifact:** A person-made (not natural) object.



Cabinet of curiosities, National Geographic Museum of Exploration

ACTIVITIES

Classroom Curation

Recommended for grades 4-8

In the podcast, we learned that museums consider many factors to add items to their collections. In this activity, students will explore how and why museums collect. Then, they'll curate a collection of their own based on a topic, theme or unit of current study.

Discuss what students learned about how museums choose objects for their collections and why the stories behind the objects are important. Remind students why museums collect: to preserve, document, exhibit, research and educate others about our world.

Choose a current topic of class study – perhaps a time period, event or person – and invite students to act as museum registrars and curators to choose objects that tell the full story of this topic.

Consider which objects to include. Students could research and choose an artifact that already exists or imagine an object from that time period that would help tell a story. Each student can choose one object for the collection. They should draw or print an image of their chosen object. Students should consider:

- Why is this object meaningful to history?
- What story does this object tell?
- What community or perspective does it represent?
- Would you use this object for exhibition, research, education or something else?

Next, invite students to present their objects to the accession committee (class), arguing for their inclusion. Combine the objects into a bulletin board collection and discuss:

- Are there duplicates of any items? Does that happen in museums?
- Does the collection tell the whole story of the topic? Which voices or aspects of the story might be missing?

Odd Objects

Recommended for grades 4-12

In the podcast, we learned about cabinets of curiosity, which collectors used to display interesting or unusual objects in the 1500s-1700s. In this activity, students will investigate a series of historical objects that inspire curiosity.

Ask students whether they have ever visited a history museum. What were some of their favorite objects, and what stories do those objects tell? As civilization changes rapidly, museum collections help document everyday life at a point in time. Students will examine some unfamiliar historical objects to consider the purposes of collections and keeping knowledge.

Provide or project images of historical items (options below). Invite students to observe the images closely, considering details such as material, shape, size and markings to guess the object's time period and purpose. For each photo, hypothesize:

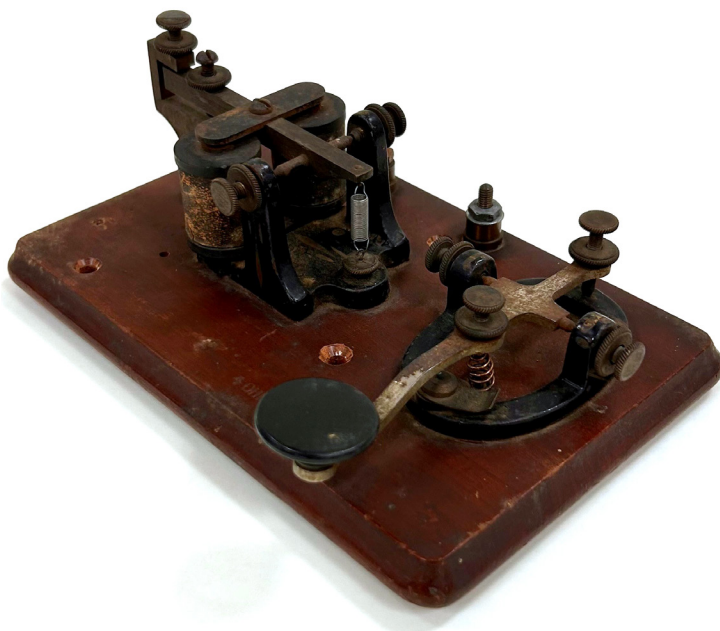
- What is the object?
- How, when and by whom was it used?
- Why was it important? What problem did it help solve?
- How do we accomplish the same task today? What modern objects, tools or practices have replaced it?
- What story does it tell? Would that story be different for different people?

Next, revisit each image as a group, sharing ideas and reaching a group conclusion before revealing the identity and purpose of each mystery object. Discuss the variety of guesses, highlighting how we can understand objects differently depending on perspective and experience. Discuss how technology or changes in society can make historical objects obsolete. Emphasize how collecting everyday objects preserves history that might otherwise be lost. Reflect on what we might collect from the modern day, and when "history" starts.

Images:

- Telegraph key, Cincinnati Museum Center (Page 3): <https://www.cincymuseum.org/wp-content/uploads/2026/02/TelegraphKey-Large-scaled.jpg>
- Gramophone, Cincinnati Museum Center (Page 4): <https://www.cincymuseum.org/wp-content/uploads/2026/02/Gramophone-Large-scaled.jpg>
- Pill roller, Cincinnati Museum Center (Page 5): <https://www.cincymuseum.org/wp-content/uploads/2026/02/PillRoller-Large-scaled.jpg>
- Sewing machine, Cincinnati Museum Center (Page 5): <https://www.cincymuseum.org/wp-content/uploads/2026/02/SewingMachine-Large-scaled.jpg>

Sample Objects:



Telegraph key:

People used telegraph keys to send messages over telegraph systems before the invention of telephones and digital communication. Operators used telegraph keys to open and close an electrical circuit, creating signals that represented letters and numbers in Morse code. By tapping the key in short and long presses, operators could transmit messages through wires quickly over long distances. These keys were used in telegraph offices, railroad stations, ships and military posts from the mid-1800s through the early 1900s. Today, people use phones, text messaging and email instead.

Image courtesy Cincinnati Museum Center:



Gramophone:

People used these devices to play recorded sound, especially music. Gramophones use a needle to follow grooves on a rotating record, which create vibrations that are amplified through a horn. People used these devices to listen to music and spoken recordings in homes and public spaces in the late 1800s and early 1900s. Today, people use digital devices such as smartphones, computers and streaming services.

Image courtesy Cincinnati Museum Center:



Transistor Radio:

People used these small, portable devices to listen to radio broadcasts such as music, news and sports. Unlike earlier radios that used vacuum tubes, transistors used semiconductors to amplify and generate electric signals. This technique made radios lighter, more durable and battery-powered. Transistor radios became popular in the 1950s and 1960s and allowed people to listen to radio almost anywhere. Today, we listen to music, news, sports and audio using digital devices such as smartphones, computers and streaming services.

Image courtesy Joe Haupt, Wikimedia Commons:
[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Vintage_Realtone_Model_TR-970_Transistor_Radio_\(8103745899\).jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Vintage_Realtone_Model_TR-970_Transistor_Radio_(8103745899).jpg)



Pill Roller:

Apothecaries and pharmacists used pill rollers to make medicines by hand before mass-produced pills were available. People rolled soft medicinal mixtures into long, even strips that could be cut into small, uniform pills. People used pill rollers during the 1700s and 1800s, when professionals prepared medications individually for each patient. Today, most medicines are made in factories and produced in standard-sized tablets or capsules.

Image courtesy Cincinnati Museum Center



Sewing Machine:

People used these devices to stitch fabric together more quickly and evenly than sewing by hand. Early sewing machines used a needle and thread powered by a hand crank or foot pedal to create strong, consistent stitches. People used these machines in homes, tailor shops and factories during the mid-1800s. Their work helped make clothing and household textiles more affordable and widely available. Today, people still use sewing machines, but they are electric or computerized, and many clothes are produced in factories.

Image courtesy Cincinnati Museum Center

Hidden Histories

Recommended for grades 7-12

In the podcast, we learned how museums like Cincinnati Museum Center collect materials from a wider array of people than in the past. In this activity, students will act as museum curators to create an exhibit that explores and celebrates an underrepresented group from their community.

Review how broader collections representing more perspectives help us develop a more accurate view of history. Divide students into groups. Invite them to consider their local community and identify a group whose experiences or contributions may have been historically overlooked. Ask students to research their group's history, culture, and contributions. If time allows, work with students to interview local living members of that community. Then, challenge students to choose objects or images that help tell the story of the group's history, experiences and impact. As they select items, have students create an exhibit – either on poster board or Powerpoint – with text that shares the stories of the objects and group. Encourage students to consider:

- What story does each object tell about the group?
- How does each object represent their experiences or contributions?
- What challenges might this group have faced that the exhibit could highlight?
- What voices or perspectives within the group might still be missing?
- How do you hope visitors will learn from and connect with this exhibit?

Invite students to present their proposed exhibits to the class, explaining why they chose each object and how it contributes to the overall story. Discuss the importance of representing diverse voices to broaden and enrich the historical narrative.



History Objects Collection, Cincinnati Museum Center

STANDARDS CONNECTIONS

- **OH History 3.2:** Primary and secondary sources can be used to show change over time.
- **OH History 4.2:** Primary and secondary sources can be used to create historical narratives.
- **OH Government 6.9:** Different perspectives on a topic can be obtained from a variety of historic and contemporary sources and used to effectively communicate and defend a claim based on evidence. Sources should be examined for accuracy and credibility.
- **OH Contemporary World Issues HS.14:** The development and use of technology influences economic, political, ethical and social issues.
- **KY HS.UH.CH.5:** Analyze the impact of technology and new ideas on American culture from 1877-present.