Make a list of 5-7 words or phrases you associate with your object.

What are some specific features or characteristics that you associate with each of those words or phrases?

Name some of the ‘moments’ in your object’s life history that you can infer from looking closely at its features /characteristics, or thinking about its intended purpose.

Pose 5 questions about those ‘moments’ that you cannot yet answer.

The Cultural Biography of an Object involves exploration of the core elements of an object’s life history, giving special consideration to its role and power as a product of culture.

CORE QUESTIONS: In what sense is a given object a product of its culture (or perhaps multiple cultures)? How does the object (as a material thing) give expression, and/or ‘speak back’ to a set of cultural ideas and attitudes at a given time, and through time? How have its functions + meanings evolved? What difference does such an object—and its related cultural dimensions—make to you as a user and a maker, an artist or a designer?

What more would you need to know to answer your questions? Think of these moments as ‘situations’ in which your object acquired a given meaning or purpose. What are some of the sources of that meaning or purpose?
POSSIBLE LINES OF INQUIRY

You have not been tasked with a formal study of provenance (the history of ownership of your object of the kind a museum curator might do in an attempt to authenticate a painting). Instead, the goal of a Cultural Biography is to explore facets of the object’s ‘life history’ that help you to understand its power/significance as an element of culture. This could mean looking at specific owners, acts of ownership and use, but known (or important) owners are not a prerequisite; the object could be relatively ‘anonymous.’ In addition to OWNERSHIP (whose has it been, how did they use it, what were reasons for attachment? etc.) you could explore:

| FUNCTION: What kind of object is it? For what purpose was it made? How do you know? |
| MATERIALS: Of what is the object made? Where did the materials come from; how were they manipulated? What difference does material make in terms of other aspects of object history? |
| ORIGIN: Where did it come from? (place of manufacture, place of acquisition, underlying ideals, etc.) |
| DESIGN: How is it made—according to what plan, using what methods/means/tools, for what intended/perceived purposes (affordances, aesthetic or experiential qualities, etc.). |
| REPRESENTATION: How has the object been known, understood, and depicted (e.g. in magazines, journalism, advice books, on billboards, etc.)? What difference has such representation made? |
| CULTURAL REFERENCES: Beyond direct representations of the object, what other manifestations has it had in the broader culture? With which activities, people, attitudes, ideas, is it associated? How have those impacted its function, design, use, value, etc.? |
| USES/MODES OF CONSUMPTION: How, and by what mechanisms (e.g. marketing, transport, display), has the object been defined as a usable/consumable thing? In what manner has it been consumed (or not)? |

Obviously you cannot pursue all of these lines of inquiry; you need to choose one(s) that are especially worthwhile given the choice of object and your interests. As you get further along this line of inquiry, and have begun to engage evidence of aspects of the object’s life history, you can 1) pose more specific questions that you want to answer about that history, and 2) identify specific ‘moments’ in/aspects of its life on which you will focus your attention in writing.

NEXT STEPS: POSE MORE QUESTIONS! CONDUCT PRELIMINARY RESEARCH. CONSULT AS NEEDED.

If you haven’t already, you should post an image of your object with a caption on the board in the Comm Des hallway. After that, start pursuing a line of inquiry and posing questions. Your working bibliography is due 10/1. Watch for an email with a link to the Cultural Biography Research Guide.

KEY DATES:
- Week of 10/1: Small-group consultation (groups of 2-3) about Working Bibliographies
- 10/19 or 10/22: Writing + Research Workshops (optional)
- 10/31: Rough Draft due (share with your group members for feedback)
- 11/1, 11/2 + 11/5: One-on-one consultation about draft (optional)
- 11/15: Completed draft with abstract due (abstract to be posted online)