

Peopling the Pot Activity

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The Activity:

The idea behind this activity is to get people to think about all of the people who have interacted with a pot during its lifetime, from creation to deposition and rediscovery. You could do this activity with any artefact type, it doesn't have to be a pot.

Instructions:

Pick an object and ask the children to think of all the people who could have interacted with it during its lifetime. You can either do this as a whole-group session and get people to shout out the answers to you. Or you could split people into smaller groups and have a competition to see which group can come up with the most answers.

Follow-on activities: The Object Stories cartoon strip activity would be a good follow-on activity because it takes the idea of object biographies a step further.

Answers:

Let's use the example of a Roman amphora. First let us think about the object itself, what it is made from, how it was made and how it was used. This will give us clues to some of the people involved in its life.

The amphora is made of clay that has been moulded into shape and then fired in a kiln. The finished amphora was then used to transport and store a liquid – probably wine or olive oil. As well as the people involved in the production of these goods, you would also have had people involved in selling and buying the goods. Then there are those who were involved in its use.

The lifespan of the amphora does not of course end once all the contents are used up. It might be used until such time as it breaks, for examples, at which point it is discarded and essentially becomes archaeology. Eventually the amphora will be rediscovered and a whole new set of people will interact with it.

Let's say that the amphora held olive oil, in which case the list of people could include:

- Clay digger
- Potter
- Kiln worker
- Delivery person(s)
- Olive farmer/farm worker(s)
- Merchant
- Sailor
- Dockyard worker(s)
- Market trader
- Buyer
- Cook
- House servants/slaves
- Modern finder
- Archaeologist
- Conservator
- Museum curator
- Member of the public viewing the exhibition

Thinking about artefacts in this way, as things with their own life history, is known as object biography and it is important because it asks you to consider the people who have interacted with the object and their personal, cultural and social relationships with it. This gives us a much more rounded view of the past than the simple historical information an object can provide. This is a much more engaging way of examining objects.