

THE
BRITISH
MUSEUM

Art & Design: Containers



Bronze *zun* - ritual wine vessel
from Hunan province, southern China
13th-12th century BC

Guide for teachers 1

Art & Design guides for teachers

The collection of the British Museum has inspired artists for hundreds of years and is a rich source of ideas and stimulation for teachers and students alike. This series of ten guides is intended to help primary and secondary teachers to use the objects in the British Museum collection for teaching art & design. This will support students' research skills, knowledge and understanding in order to make their practical work more meaningful and contextualised.

Each guide focuses on a topic. Each topic is analysed through four or five themes, each of which is illustrated with a museum object, from different historical periods and world cultures. These topics, themes and objects have been specially chosen so that you and your students can use them as starting points to explore the collection further, either at the Museum or online. Each guide ends with points for classroom discussion and brief ideas for starting off activities and projects. The guides in the series are:

- 1 Containers
- 2 Sculpture
- 3 Textiles
- 4 Symbols
- 5 Celebration
- 6 The natural world
- 7 Identity
- 8 Gods and spirits
- 9 Objects in motion
- 10 Death and the afterlife

Most of the objects have been chosen from the Museum's online database, available through: www.britishmuseum.org/explore/introduction.aspx. There you can find high quality images which can be copied into your own presentations for the classroom or for students to download.

Contextual understanding

In order to develop their critical thinking, students should examine the following when considering any museum object:

- | | |
|------------|--|
| Origin: | Who made it? Where and when was it made? |
| Materials: | What is it made from? |
| Process: | How was it made? |
| Function: | What was it used for? |
| Meaning: | What does it mean? |

Once students have understood the context, they can analyse the form and decoration of the object which are usually determined or influenced by all these aspects.

World cultures

The guides are not based around a particular cultural or geographical region. If you wish to focus your study on, for example, objects from Africa then use the list below, where the guides which contain objects from particular regions have been grouped.

Africa

Death and the afterlife, Gods and spirits, Identity, Sculpture, Symbols, Textiles.

The Americas

Celebration, Containers, Gods and spirits, Symbols, Textiles, Natural World.

Asia

Celebration, Containers, Death and the afterlife, Gods and spirits, Objects in motion, Sculpture.

Europe

Celebration, Containers, Death and the afterlife, Gods and Spirits, Identity, Objects in motion, Sculpture, Textiles, Natural World.

Middle East

Gods and spirits, Sculpture, Natural World.

Oceania

Containers, Death and the afterlife, Gods and spirits, Sculpture, Symbols, Natural World.

Cross-curricular links

Citizenship

Many of these topics tap into citizenship themes such as local and national identity, globalisation and global issues, and the impact of the media.

History

The objects are from a variety of historical contexts and periods. Research and discussions about the use of clothing for status and the importance of symbols are central to exploring images as evidence in history.

Geography

Examining objects from specific cultures is an excellent way of understanding how humans interact and cope with living and surviving in different environments.

Religious Education

Many of these objects have some spiritual significance. Those relating to the afterlife and deities are ideal starting points for considering similarities and differences in belief systems.

Containers

Containers, in all their shapes, forms and sizes, are fundamental to human survival. They are used in every area of life, from transporting and serving foods, liquids and goods, to preserving human and animal remains. In other instances, they are purely ornamental and cease to contain anything at all.

Inspiration from the animal world

Once artists have mastered the process of making containers, they are able to develop and embellish the form that they take. For ceremonial or ritual vessels, the decorative appearance of the object is of the utmost importance as the container is likely only to be moved short distances and left on an altar or in a tomb.

The beauty of the container is integral to the prestige of the offering. In many cultures, craftsmen have taken inspiration from animals both for their form but also the symbolism of the animal. The ram in China had several meanings and was associated with peace and harmony.

This bronze zun was a vessel for holding wine which would have been buried with its owner, offering food and wine for their ancestors. It was cast in bronze, a highly valued material, and required skilled craftsmen. The design of the vessel uses the shape of two rams, with their heads as handles and legs keeping the vessel upright, thus the form of the animal is both decorative and practical. These rams are notably lifelike in their body shape. The vessel is decorated in a simple regular pattern, with more intricate symmetrical designs on the face.



Containers for transport

Containers enable humans to survive and prosper. Moving food, water and goods in quantities away from their original source allowed humans create settlements and begin to trade, thus creating economies.

When creating a container for different purposes, the materials must be carefully selected for suitability – e.g. permeability, weight, how can it be stored, what is available and in what quantities. This

container has a particular purpose – that of carrying a baby to enable the mother to continue her daily routine. It has been carefully designed to be both decorative and functional – it consists of a board, a footrest and a decorated fabric hoop to hold the baby in place. The baby would be wrapped in moss or rabbit skin, then covered in deerskin and tied into the cradle. The decorated hoop has toys added to it – in this case bells and porcupine skins. The cradle could be worn or leant against a tree, protecting the child when the parent carried out necessary activities such as berry picking nearby.



Protecting, storing and displaying objects

Containers can be developed not only to protect and preserve objects, but also organise them systematically. Depending on the type of container, they might include drawers, pockets and other such compartments to enable the user to organise themselves. This specimen tray was once a drawer and part of the cabinet of Sir Hans Sloane (1660-1753) whose collection provided part of the foundation of the British Museum.



Sloane was a doctor and also a collector who needed to store his array of objects and medicines carefully. This drawer had small compartments which contains stones, powders, metals, some of which have more containers within them – glazed boxes with seeds, fruit, bark, roots, gums and resins inside. The cabinet was carefully designed to protect the objects inside from destructive insects.

Coffins – containers for the afterlife

A practice common to many cultures throughout history has been the desire to protect and preserve the bodies or remains of the dead to honour their passing. These are often buried for hygienic as well as spiritual reasons. The design of coffins varies widely but another common feature is the plethora of symbols depicted on them which tell us about the belief system from which the body came. This hollow log coffin of the Liygawumirr people is called Mululu, the name of the wild cherry tree it is made from. It is made from a tree that has been hollowed by termites. It is painted with designs associated with the family group. These log coffins and the rituals around them ensure that the spirit makes its final transition to the land of the dead. The rituals also comfort those who mourn. In Eastern Arnhem land, home of this practice, the last ritual takes place some years after death when the bones are now dry. They are then painted with red ochre, broken and placed in a hollow log coffin such as this one. As this happens, relatives of the deceased dance, acting out the soul's hazardous journey to the land of the dead. The coffin was then left to stand upright and would gradually be worn away by the weather.



General discussion

- Start by identifying with the students the basic meaning of a container and explore the different types of function.
- Then move on to more unusual ideas. One can consider a museum as a huge container or a house containing its family or a mask as containing the face – think of other examples such as these.
- Ask the students to imagine life without containers – what wouldn't they be able to do?

Projects and activities

Primary

Animals

Ask the students to explore what parts of containers animals or parts of animals have been used to represent and why. Then they can make their own containers using animal features.

Conversion

Collect used containers and then the students alter and decorate them to create a container for another purpose, e.g. an egg carton as a desk tidy.

Secondary

Natural containers

Explore objects, such as trees, craters, tunnels which have been hollowed out; use the inspiration of hollowing out (and where the substance goes which has disappeared) to create a multimedia montage.

Containment

Have a discussion with students about the different implications of containment; starting from objects, move into discussions of containing people – prisons, ships, coffins etc and of the feelings that emerge from restriction.

Illustrations

Bronze *zun* - ritual wine vessel

from Hunan province, southern China
Shang dynasty, 13th-12th century BC
height 43 cm

Ojibwa Cradle

Algonquian style
from Great Lakes region of Minnesota, North America
before AD 1825

Hans Sloane's specimen tray

from England
first half of the 18th century AD
45 x 45 cm

Painted hollow log coffin

Liygawumirr clan
From Arnhem land, Northern Territory, Australia
1980s
Length about 3 metres

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