

# Doing Research II

## The Object and the Source

Some of the basic research done on an object is performed to answer several important questions. How old is it? Where did it come from? Is it authentic? To find the answers, the researcher first finds reliable sources. Once these sources are made available the researcher carefully examines the object, using the information given in the sources along with his/her highly-developed senses. Notes are taken every step of the way.

### What is Compared?

The most helpful sources are those that demonstrate how an authentic object of the kind being studied would be made. This includes the creation process, the materials used, and the look of the final product. All three of these factors are used to compare the object the museum is examining to the objects described by the sources. The sources are especially important if the information shows how any of these factors may have changed. For example, the decorations painted on ancient Greek pottery changed over time. By comparing the illustrations in the source to the object in the museum, the researcher may be able to assign an approximate date to a pot by its appearance. In another example, a source may give the researcher the information that a certain type of object was made of iron before World War II and of steel after World War II. If the object being analyzed is made of steel, the researcher will know it was not made before the 1940s.

### How are the Senses Used?

Through good sources, practice, and keen observation, a researcher can learn to discover a great deal about an object through his/her senses. Here are just a few examples:

- ◆ When the researcher wonders if an object is handmade or machine made, he/she may rely on a visual examination. Handmade objects show irregularities, such as uneven stitches on a handsewn shirt or tool marks on a hand-carved toy.
- ◆ Objects can be made out of plastic that visibly resemble objects carved out of ivory. When both are touched, though, the ivory piece will feel cooler.
- ◆ The sense of smell can also be important. In the Philippines, older baskets will often have a smoky, fatty smell as well as a sooty appearance. This is because the food baskets are preserved by rubbing them with animal fat and hanging them on the walls near the cooking fires.

## Does it Fit?

When comparing an object to reliable information on similar objects every fact learned from the information sources must be verified on the object. For each fact, the researcher must ask, "Does the object fit the facts?" Here are examples of how this works:

- ◆ Everything ages. In most instances, the older a piece of wood gets, the drier and more cracked it becomes. (An exception would be if the wood is from an underwater shipwreck or was buried in bog-like conditions.) If an object is supposed to be 2000 years old, but the wood in it is still green, the object does not fit the facts.
- ◆ Some materials have been available only for a short period of time. If an object is supposed to be 500 years old and is made of plastic, the object does not fit the fact that plastics did not exist 500 years ago.
- ◆ If an object is supposed to be a headrest, but you can't rest your head on it, the object does not fit the facts.
- ◆ If a shirt was supposed to be from a period long before sewing machines, but it is obviously machine made, the object does not fit the facts.
- ◆ If the object is supposed to be from a certain area but is made from the skin of an animal that does not live in that area (or an area the people traded with), the object does not fit the facts.
- ◆ If the style of painting on the pot is supposed to be ancient Greek, but the people portrayed on the pot are wearing Civil War-style hoop skirts, the object does not fit the facts.

It only takes one fact that does not fit to put the identification of the object into question. But before saying something does not fit, take the examination one step further by considering possibilities like those given in the following checklist. Looking from this new viewpoint might help make the facts fit together.

- ◆ Sometimes the people of one culture borrow from another culture, adapting an object to fit their own beliefs or ideas of beauty.
- ◆ Sometimes an object is created at one time but shows signs of a repair made at a later date.
- ◆ Artistic styles are not set in stone. Style One does not end on Monday and Style Two begin on Tuesday. Not everyone is a master at his/her craft. Just because something survived it does not mean it was "the good stuff" of that culture. There are inferior artists and artists who do not follow the style of the moment.
- ◆ Objects may have been changed over time. The donor may have changed the object before giving it to the museum. A collector, for instance, may have put holes in the sides of an African mask so he could wire it for hanging.

Once observation and notetaking are completed, researchers may still not have definite answers to the questions they had in the beginning. Often, they find themselves ending with a longer list of questions than when they started. Some objects may have to be put aside until more of their kind are found and more information is gathered. For some objects, technical testing may give further answers, but not every method may be available to every researcher. Technical methods can be very expensive. They may also require that part of the object be removed to complete the testing. Since the preservation of the object is of high importance, tests that require the removal of a part of the object are done infrequently.