

Artefacts through History Collection

Nothing, for children, quite matches the thrill of handling artefacts, however old and however common. For example, a great lesson in both history and maths is using pre-decimal currency. Easy to come by, pre-decimal coins help children understand the period before 1971. You can do the same with British stamps. Or use 'commemorative' stamps to investigate British history - how do we remember our history via stamps! This collection of replica artefacts gives you the opportunity to explore the past in a 'hands-on' way. Here are four ways to do so.

1. As an introduction to artefacts;

There are 13 objects in this collection. Split your class into two or three and give each group an artefact. [Some are harder to identify than others so you might differentiate the lesson by degree of difficulty.] Ask them to explore and research the object. Questions to consider might include: [I'm sure you could think of many more to ask.]

[a] Design and construction.

What is it made of?

How is it made?

When was it made?

Who made it?

How does it work?

Does it come apart? How does it go back together?

Why do you think it was made this way?

[b] Appearance.

What does it look like?

What does it feel like?

Does it smell?

Is it heavy, or light?

Has it been used, or is it new?

Has it been altered, or is it in its original condition?

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[c] value of the object.

do you think it is valuable?

was it valuable when it was made?

was it an 'everyday' object?

did it make people's lives easier?

was it a special object for special occasions?

[d] function.

why was it made?

what was it used for?

who would have used it?

where would they have used it?

is it easy or difficult to use?

The children might have to research their object on the internet and/or using books to be able to answer all of these questions, but the first priority is looking at, and handling 'their' object to discover as much as they can about it and the period it belongs to.

You might then pull this together by asking the children to 'place' their object on a timeline, to see how all the objects relate to each other. You might also ask the children to hold up their object for the whole class to see and report back to. You might finish by asking if we have similar items today that they know of, to emphasise similarity and difference.

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2. As an integral part of the history unit you are studying.

There are two Stone Age artefacts in the pack - the hand axe and the fish harpoon. Whilst studying the Stone Age, let the children handle these, and make suggestions about what they are, how they are made and what they were used for. They might produce a labelled drawing explaining their manufacture and use. Again, they might need to research these items before they can finally decide on their use.

Next, ask the children what these two artefacts tell us about life in the Stone Age. The fish harpoon, for example, tells us they were hunters, and that fish was an integral part of their diet. But what would the harpoon head have been attached to, and how would it have been used? It also tells us how skilled they were, at carving and shaping bone. Equally important is the 'what do these artefacts not tell us about life in the Stone Age' question, because artefacts can be useful for some things, and not for others.

3. As a thematic collection.

There are three oil lamps in the collection - a Roman oil lamp; a Tudor oil lamp, and a Victorian, Edwardian or World War Two 'hurricane' lamp, although this lightweight design dates from the 1930s. This provides a great opportunity to explore similarity and difference, and change over time. Ask the children some of the questions suggested in activity one, to get them to familiarise themselves with the artefacts - what are they made of; how do they work; what are they used for; where might they be used, for example.

The key activity, however, is to get them to engage with similarity and difference, by asking just those questions:

[a] how similar are they?

[b] how different are they?

You might use a table, or a flowchart, or a poster or 'powerpoint,' but the key aim to engage the children in discussion about change. Obviously, they all burn oil of one sort or another, and they would all have been used to provide light after dark. Which would have been more effective? Why? Which would have cheapest to run? Who would have used them? When? Which, in their opinion, would be safest? Which the most dangerous? Remind them of the Great Fire of London, for example. You might ask the children when each was made, which period they belong to, rather than tell them the answer. Let them deduce the answer from their existing knowledge of history. You could carry out a similar activity using the children's toys in the collection, especially if you study Toys as part of your Key Stage One Programme of Study.

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4. As a way to extend children's knowledge beyond 1066, probably in Year Six, as a 'pull things together' or 'Big Picture of History' unit.

Group the artefacts into periods. You might put the Stone Age, Greek and Roman ones together; the Anglo-Saxon and Viking ones together; the Tudor and Victorian items together; and finally the hurricane lamp and football rattle/WW2 air-raid warden's rattle together. Split your class into groups, and ask them to look carefully at each group of artefacts in turn, building up a picture of life in each period, and thinking about the similarities and differences. When they have explored all four groups of artefacts, ask them to compile, either physically, or with photographs or drawings, a fifth group of artefacts that would represent today. What would they choose? Why? Does each group choose the same artefacts to represent today, or different ones? Can the class agree on which three or four they would include in this artefact pack bring it completely up to date? If they could choose only one item from each period, what would it be? Why?

Finally, pull this activity together by exploring the materials used in each period, the design, colour, appearance of each piece, and how attractive they think they are. By moving into a subjective, rather than objective, view of events you will be reinforcing the idea that history is open-ended, that interpretations vary depending on what evidence you use, and that is it OK to have differing opinions, as long as they are based on using the evidence.

Most importantly of all, allow the children to handle - to feel, to touch, to smell the artefacts, to conjecture about their use, and to reach their own conclusions. Have fun!