

# The History of Race in America in 100 Objects: A Project to Explore and Discuss the Evolution of Race Consciousness in America

**Rick Malmstrom<sup>1</sup> and Sara Sturdevant<sup>2</sup>**

<sup>1</sup>The Ellis School, Pittsburgh, United States

<sup>2</sup>The Ellis School, Pittsburgh, United States

E-mail: malmstromr@theellisschool.org

E-mail: sturdevants@theellisschool.org

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As a part of the continuing discussion about race in our American history and art history classes, we have opted to try and explore the evolution of American racial attitudes and consciousness in a new way - through an examination of 100 simple objects from four different time periods. Inspired by the British Museum's *A History of the World in 100 Objects* and by the changing nature of racial attitudes and consciousness in the US, we have designed this as a year-long project in four segments:

- 1750-1860 - Pre Civil War - Slavery
- 1860-1950 - Post Civil War - Segregation
- 1950-2000 - Civil Rights Movement - Change
- 2000-2014 - Today - Where Are We?

For each segment, students choose an image of one object from a group of common objects. For example, Part 1 might include an ink bottle, a scythe, and a pair of dice, and or many other objects used everyday during colonial times. Then students are asked research their object and answer these ten questions about it:

1. What are you? What was your function/use?
2. Who used you? Who didn't? (age, race, gender, social class, etc.)
3. Who made you? Where were you made?
4. Are there stereotypes attached to you and your use?
5. Where & when were you used?
6. What does use of you say about your user?
7. What significant events occurred when & where you were used?
8. Did your use change over time? How?
9. Your own specific question about the race of your makers and/or users
10. Your own specific question about the race of your makers and/or users

Once they've answered these questions, each student develops a first person (speaking as their object) commentary which includes these answers in a narrative form. Then they record their narratives, combine them with images of their objects, and post these as Google Slides presentations on the class *YouTube* channel so that each "story" can all be easily accessed and reviewed by their classmates.

While this project was something of an experiment, it succeeded in helping students to use new tools to analyze and assess historic issues and periods. The project encouraged students to think about race and racial consciousness from a broader, more inclusive perspective, helping students see how and why American thinking about race has evolved over time. For example, one student's object was a rocking chair. She wrote, "I liked this project because it

let me look at elements of the history of African Americans that was not all distressing and negative. Examining how a rocking chair in the early 1900's could represent the importance of family and social relationships emphasized some of the positive things that came out of a history of racism and hatred that still affects me today." A second student surmised, "Looking at the "life" of a clothes iron in the 19<sup>th</sup> century let me explore a set of viewpoints that I had only considered at in a broad way. By giving words to an object in the hands of a woman who was suffering from horrible racism I could see how the kind of work she had to do for others was endless and physically challenging. The questions we asked about how the object was made, used and treated let me understand how it represented important social facts."

The project also had each object act as both an observer and a storyteller, helping students develop their skills in performing the tasks required to consider the larger context of an object's roles and functions. Finally, as they researched and constructed their narratives, students were forced to confront their own thinking and attitudes, re-examining people, events, and ideas that they already know from a more traditional perspective, and hopefully coming to new conclusions about these.