

# Studying the Material Culture of Three Nomadic Cultures: The Gabra, Mongols, and Blackfeet



## Overview

The things that people make and use in their daily life provide great insight into their society. Thus, becoming a skilled observer of material culture is an important part of being a good cultural researcher. However, learning from objects can actually be much more subjective than reading about a culture in written texts, since there is no specific voice attached.

Cultural objects, or artifacts, can serve a functional purpose as well as a symbolic one. Determining the function of an object is not always straightforward. Furthermore, understanding why it was created the way that it was can be an even greater challenge. The first step in the process is to determine the more obvious elements of an object (i.e., the materials, the structure, and the function). Step two is to make guesses regarding the values, beliefs, and cultural world view of the object's creator. This type of general hypothesizing is possible because all people share such human experiences as life and death, gender roles, familial bonds, biological needs (food, water, clothing, shelter), continuity and change, and wanting a sense of belonging.

Using a sample object from three different nomadic cultures, guide students through an observation activity. This exercise offers students the opportunity to sharpen their observational skills and to use observations to come to a new understanding of culture. It also shows students the limitations of observing objects without contextual information.

## Concepts

Cultural artifacts and how they can be analyzed to determine their materials, structures, and functions; how we can draw inferences about the values, beliefs, and cultural worldview of the people who created them; making observations and drawing inferences.

## Objectives

- ▶ Observe various artifacts, noting and distinguishing between observations and inferences.
- ▶ Analyze the choices people made in the creation of the artifact and develop reasonable hypotheses regarding the values, beliefs, and cultural worldview of the object's creators.
- ▶ Generate their own questions about different cultural artifacts.
- ▶ Examine artifacts within a context in order to answer these questions.
- ▶ Compare the choices made by the cultures under study and their own (e.g. about clothing, shelters, work spaces, art, and recreation) and draw reasonable conclusions about both cultures.



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## Standards and Assessment

### Standards

The materials in this unit are closely correlated to the National Science Education Standards, Standards for the English Language Arts, and Curriculum Standards for Social Studies. A listing of the standards follows. A check mark indicates the standards that are addressed.

### Assessment

This unit provides tasks that can be used to assess students' understanding of the information presented. Use the following questions to assess each student's reasoning, responses, understanding, and interaction.

- How well did the student use his or her observation skills?
- How well did the student demonstrate an understanding of the information provided?
- How well did the student communicate the observations he or she made?
- How well did the student explain concepts and ideas to other students?
- Was the student able to use evidence to support his or her conclusions?
- How well did the student complete the tasks outlined?
- How well did the student participate in all aspects of cooperative work?



# National Science Education Standards

GRADES K-4

National Committee on Science Education Standards and Assessment, National Research Council

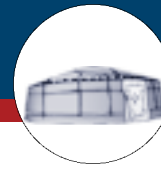
Science as Inquiry	
Abilities necessary to do scientific inquiry	✓
Understanding about scientific inquiry	
Science in Personal and Social Perspective	
Characteristics and changes in populations	
Types of resources	✓
Changes in environments	
Science and technology in local challenges	
History and Nature of Science	
Science as a human endeavor	

# National Science Education Standards

GRADES 5-8

National Committee on Science Education Standards and Assessment, National Research Council

Science as Inquiry	
Abilities necessary to do scientific inquiry	✓
Understanding about scientific inquiry	
Science in Personal and Social Perspectives	
Populations, resources, and environments	
Science and technology in society	
History and Nature of Science	
Science as a human endeavor	
Nature of science	



# Standards for the English Language Arts

GRADES K-8

National Council of Teachers of English

Students read to build an understanding of texts, themselves, and the cultures of the United States and the world.	✓
Students read a wide range of literature from many periods in many genres to build an understanding of the many dimensions of human experience.	
Students adjust their use of spoken, written, and visual language to communicate effectively with a variety of audiences and for different purposes.	✓
Students employ a wide range of writing strategies to communicate with different audiences for a variety of purposes.	
Students apply knowledge of language structure, conventions, and figurative language to create, critique, and discuss texts.	
Students conduct research; generate ideas and questions and pose problems; gather, evaluate, and synthesize data from a variety of sources; communicate their discoveries in ways that suit their purpose and audience.	✓
Students use a variety of technological and information resources to gather and synthesize information.	
Students develop a respect for diversity in language use.	

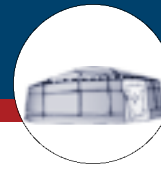
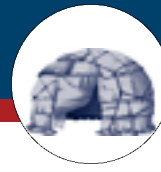


# Curriculum Standards for Social Studies

GRADES K-4

National Council for the Social Studies

<b>Culture and Cultural Diversity</b>	
Explore and describe similarities and differences in the ways groups, societies, and cultures address similar human needs and concerns.	✓
Give examples of how experiences may be interpreted differently by people from diverse cultural perspectives and frames of reference.	
Describe ways in which language, stories, folktales, music, and artistic creations serve as expressions of culture and influence behavior of people living in a particular culture.	✓
Compare ways in which people from different cultures think about and deal with their physical environment and social conditions.	
Give examples and describe the importance of cultural unity and diversity within and across groups.	
<b>Time, Continuity, and Change</b>	
Demonstrate an understanding that different people may describe the same event or situation in diverse ways, citing reasons for the differences in views.	
Demonstrate an ability to use correctly vocabulary associated with time such as past, present, future, and long ago; read and construct simple timelines, identify examples of change; and recognize examples of cause and effect relationships.	
Demonstrate an understanding that people in different times and places view the world differently.	
<b>People, Places, and Environments</b>	
Construct and use mental maps of locales, regions, and the world that demonstrate understanding of relative location, direction, size and shape.	
Interpret, use, and distinguish various representations of the Earth, such as maps, globes, and photographs.	
Use appropriate resources, data sources, and geographic tools such as atlases, databases, grid systems, charts, graphs, and maps to generate, manipulate, and interpret information.	
Locate and distinguish among varying landforms and geographic features, such as mountains, plateaus, islands, and oceans.	
Describe and speculate about physical system changes, such as seasons, climate and weather, and the water cycle.	

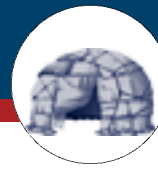


# Curriculum Standards for Social Studies

continued

GRADES K-4

Describe how people create places that reflect ideas, personality, culture, and wants and needs as they design homes, playgrounds, classrooms, and the like.	✓
Examine the interaction of human beings and their physical environment, the use of land, building of cities, and ecosystem changes in selected locales and regions.	✓
Explore ways that the Earth's physical features have changed over time in the local region and beyond and how these changes may be connected to one another.	
<b>Individual Development and Identity</b>	
Describe personal connections to place—especially place as associated with immediate surroundings.	✓
Identify and describe ways family groups and community influence the individual's daily life and personal choices.	
<b>Individuals, Groups, and Institutions</b>	
Identify roles as learned behavior patterns in group situations such as student, family member, peer play group member, or club member.	
Give examples of and explain group and institutions influences such as religious beliefs, laws, and peer pressure, on people, events, and elements of culture.	
<b>Production, Distribution, and Consumption</b>	
Give examples that show how scarcity and choice govern our economic decisions.	
Distinguish between needs and wants.	
Describe how we depend upon workers with specialized jobs and the ways in which they contribute to the production and exchange of goods and services.	✓
<b>Science, Technology, and Society</b>	
Identify and describe examples in which science and technology have changed the lives of people, such as in homemaking, childcare, work, transportation, and communication.	✓
<b>Global Connections</b>	
Explain ways that language art, music, belief systems, and other cultural elements may facilitate global understanding or lead to misunderstanding.	✓
Explore causes, consequences, and possible solutions to persistent, contemporary, and emerging global issues, such as pollution and endangered species.	



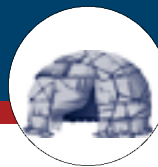
# Curriculum Standards for Social Studies

GRADES 5-8

continued

<b>Culture and Cultural Diversity</b>	
Compare similarities and differences in the ways cultures meet human needs and concerns.	
Explain how information and experiences may be interpreted by people of diverse cultural perspectives.	✓
Explain and give examples of how language, literature, the arts, architecture, other artifacts, traditions, beliefs, values and behaviors contribute to the development and transmission of culture.	✓
Explain why individuals and groups respond differently to their physical and social environments and or changes to them on the basis of shared assumptions, values, and beliefs.	✓
<b>Time, Continuity, and Change</b>	
Demonstrate an understanding that different scholars may describe the same event or situation in different ways but must provide reasons or evidence for their views.	
Identify and use key concepts such as chronology, causality, change, conflict, and complexity to explain, analyze, and show connections among patterns of historical change and continuity.	
<b>People, Places, and Environments</b>	
Elaborate mental maps of locales, regions, and the world that demonstrate understanding of relative location, direction, size and shape.	
Create, interpret, use, and distinguish various representations of the Earth, such as maps, globes, and photographs.	
Use appropriate resources, data sources, and geographic tools such as aerial photographs, satellite images, geographic information systems (GIS), map projects, and cartography to generate, manipulate, and interpret information such as atlases, data bases, grid systems, charts, graphs, and more.	
Locate and describe varying landforms and geographic features, such as mountains, plateaus, islands, rain forests, deserts, and oceans, and explain their relationship within the ecosystem.	
Describe physical system changes such as seasons, climate and weather, and the water cycle and identify geographic patterns associated with them.	
Describe how people create places that reflect cultural values and ideals as they build neighborhoods, parks, shopping centers, and the like.	✓
Examine, interpret, and analyze physical and cultural patterns and their interactions, such as land use, settlement patterns, cultural transmission of customs and ideas, and ecosystem changes.	✓





# Curriculum Standards for Social Studies

GRADES 5-8

continued

Describe ways that historical events have been influenced by, and have influenced, physical and human geographic factors in local, regional, national, and global settings.	
Observe and speculate about social and economic effects of environmental changes and crises resulting from phenomena such as floods, storms, and drought.	
<b>Individual Development and Identity</b>	
Describe personal connections to place – as associated with community, nation, and the world	
Describe the ways family, gender, ethnicity, nationality, and institutional affiliations contribute to personal identity.	
Identify and describe ways regional, ethnic, and national cultures influence individuals' daily lives.	✓
<b>Individuals, Groups, and Institutions</b>	
Demonstrate an understanding of concepts such as role, status, and social class in describing the interactions of individuals and social groups.	
Analyze group and institutional influences on people, events, and elements of culture.	
<b>Production, Distribution, and Consumption</b>	
Give and explain examples of ways that economic systems structure choices about how goods and services are to be produced and distributed.	
Describe the role of specialization and exchange in the economic process.	
Explain and illustrate how values and beliefs influence different economic decisions.	
<b>Science, Technology, and Society</b>	
Examine and describe the influence of culture on scientific and technological choices and advancement, such as in transportation, medicine, and warfare.	✓
Show through specific examples how science and technology have changed people's perceptions of the social and natural world, such as in their relationship to the land, animal life, family life, and economic needs, wants, and security.	✓
Seek reasonable and ethical solutions to problems that arise when scientific advancements and social norms or values come into conflict.	
<b>Global Connections</b>	
Describe instances in which language, art, music, belief systems, and other cultural elements can facilitate global understanding or cause misunderstanding.	
Explore causes, consequences, and possible solutions to persistent, contemporary, and emerging global issues, such as health, security, resource allocation, economic development, and environmental quality.	



## Teacher Strategies

### MATERIALS

Everyday Objects, which illustrates a Gabra butte, a Mongol milk container, and a Blackfeet parfleche. Objects in Context which shows the three objects in context and provides some contextual information.

### PROCEDURE

1. Distribute Everyday Objects to the students. On the board write two headings: Observation and Inference. As you guide students through a process of carefully looking at the objects, record their observations (that which they can see) in the first column and their inferences (that which they conclude from their observations) in the second column. Make sure that students understand the difference between these two kinds of information.



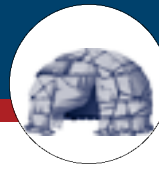
2. Guide students' observations by asking them questions that are suited for their age level. The following questions are meant to help you get started.



Describe what you see...

- ~ *What shapes do you see?*
- ~ *What words describe the size and shape of the object?*
- ~ *Why is the size and shape important?*
- ~ *What type of decoration is used?*
- ~ *What details do you find interesting?*
- ~ *What materials were used?*
- ~ *Was this made by hand?*
- ~ *What evidence do you have to support this?*
- ~ *Why do you think they used those materials?*
- ~ *What is the function of this object? Is this likely to be an important function in the culture? Why or why not?*

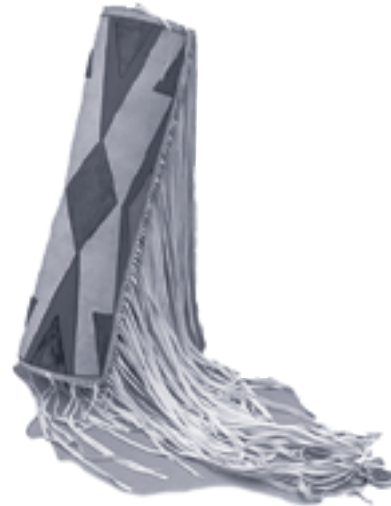
3. Remind students to pay particular attention to the choices people make as they utilize available resources to create houses, clothing, tools, and objects for their daily life. Ask students to consider what materials were used to make each of these objects and what the use of these materials can tell them about the culture.



4. Have students come up with a list of questions that they still have about the objects. Write these down.
5. What you can learn from an object alone is limited. Begin a class discussion that explores the best way to study material culture is to carefully observe an object and then observe how the object is used in daily life. To do this a researcher can: 1) look at photographs that show how the object is used; 2) read field notes describing how the artifact is made and used; and, 3) read cultural correspondence, research papers, and anthropological information relating to the object.
6. **Distribute Objects in Context.** Have students fold the paper in half lengthwise. Ask them to look first at the side that has the pictures. What new information can they learn from seeing the objects in context? Make sure all students can identify the location of the object within the picture. How does this help them better understand the objects as well as the culture? Then, have students turn the paper to the side with the text. What new information can they learn from reading about the object? How does this help them better understand the objects as well as the culture? Were students able to answer the questions they asked in step four? If not, encourage students to conduct research to find the answer.

#### PUTTING IT ALL TOGETHER

○ Investigate the choices that our society has made in our own material culture. How is our architecture related to our environment (consider buildings in New York City, for example, as compared with those in Florida or Alaska)? How do we decide what clothing to wear? What types of tools do we use to accomplish our daily activities? What materials are these objects made from? What can we learn about our own culture from studying the objects we create?





NAME: \_\_\_\_\_

DATE: \_\_\_\_\_

## Everyday Objects

### OBJECT ONE ⇨

**Material:** Woven grass and leather, the holder is made from wooden sticks and leather.

**Approximate Size:** 30" tall x 18" wide



### ⇨ OBJECT TWO

**Material:** Metal

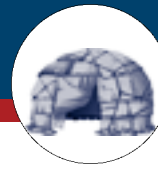
**Approximate Size:** 18" tall x 12" wide



### OBJECT THREE ⇨

**Material:** Rawhide, leather fringe, and paint.

**Approximate Size:** 36" tall x 6" wide



NAME: \_\_\_\_\_

DATE: \_\_\_\_\_

## Objects in Context



fold here

**Name of Object:** Butte in a Holder

**Culture:** Gabra

**Use:** To carry water.

**Significance:** Because the Gabra live in such a dry region, it is very important for them to store and transport water.

**Name of Object:** Milk Container

**Culture:** Mongol

**Use:** To carry milk.

**Significance:** Because the Mongols do not farm, their diets are largely made up of meat and milk.

**Name of Object:** Cylinder Parfleche

**Culture:** Blackfeet

**Use:** To carry long objects such as arrows and feather headdresses.

**Significance:** The nomadic Blackfeet needed a way to easily store and transport their things. They tied these pouches to clothing and horses.