Twenty Questions to Ask an Object

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In these questions, there are two main entities at play, the object and the inspector. A third component is the setting in which the inspection takes place. The initial questions guide close scrutiny of the object. Try to answer them through inspection only. Resist the temptation to quickly identify and categorize the object, and to make assumptions about its purpose or meaning. As you make inferences about the object, consider the kinds of cultural knowledge that you base them on. As the questions begin to address the object in larger contexts, answering them will most likely require other modes of inquiry alongside inspection.

1) What are the object's sensory properties?
    a. Sight: Line and shape (two-dimensional), form (three-dimensional), color (hue, light, dark), texture (reflective, matte)
    b. Touch: Form and shape (round, angular), texture (smooth, rough), temperature (cold, warm), density (hard, soft)
    c. Sound: Consider what sounds the object makes when manipulated
    d. Taste
    e. Smell

2) What are the object's physical properties?
    a. Materials (wood, stone, plastic; note that identifying materials may not be possible through inspection alone)
    b. Size (length, width, depth, volume)
    c. Weight
    d. Number of parts and how they are organized (symmetrical, asymmetrical, distinct, merged)
    e. Inscriptions (printed, stamped, engraved)

3) Does the object appear to be human made?
    a. If it is human made, does it show evidence of natural processes? (oxidation, decay)
    b. If not human made, does it show evidence of human intervention? (modification, wear)

4) How does the object interact with human bodies?
    a. Other species?

5) How is the object oriented?
    a. Unidirectional?
    b. Does it have a presumed front, back, bottom, or top?
    c. Does it have open and closed parts? If, for example, it appears to have a "handle" or a "lid," how do you know?

6) What is the object's purpose?

7) Does the object prompt some kind of action or performance?
    a. Individual
    b. Social

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8) What is your emotional response to the object?
    a. What might it evoke for others?

9) How was the object produced?
    a. Techniques
    b. Social structures

10) Who made the object, and under what circumstances?
    a. Was it made by one or more individuals?
    b. Was the maker also the designer?
    c. When was it made?
    d. Where was it made?

11) What is the object's history?
    a. Who owned and/or used it?
    b. When?
    c. Where?

12) Is the object part of a group of objects? If so, how?
    a. Is it part of a genre? If so, what features does it share with other objects of its genre?
    b. What is its spatial relationship to other objects?
    c. Does it have a metaphorical relationship to other objects? If so, how?
    d. Is it part of a collection, whether personal or institutional?

13) How does, or did, possession of the object relate to individual and/or group identity (e.g., class, race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, nation, religion)?

14) Does the object relate to a set (or sets) of beliefs (e.g., spiritual, ideological)? If so, how?

15) Is the object part of a system (or systems) of exchange (e.g., commodity, gift)? If so, how?

16) What is its value (e.g., economic, cultural) and how might you locate it within systems of value?

17) Does the object reflect and/or structure human agency? If so, how?

18) What is the object's contemporary context and relevance?

19) What is special or distinctive about the object?

20) How would you interpret it to others?

For more information on the "Twenty Years, Twenty Questions to Ask an Object" workshop:
http://www.theasa.net/caucus_material/item/twenty_years_twenty_questions_to_ask_an_object_the_video/

For a video of the workshop, see the Chipstone Foundation's ArtBabble channel:
http://www.artbabble.org/partner/chipstone