

Assignment: The Nature of Objects (week 3)

Material Culture or Artefact Analysis - (up to 1000 words)

This assignment asks you to analyse an artefact or piece of material culture. Material culture refers to a human made item. Analysis of material culture demonstrates the relationship between people and the stuff they make.

- **Action/Task:** choose a physical object or artefact to analyse.
- **Process:** Analyse means methodical, and detailed, explanation and interpretation. Your task is to clearly explain and interpret the item you have chosen.
- **Aim:** to provide detailed and methodical information that
 - a) *describes the object*
 - and
 - b) *situates the object within social life so that you demonstrate the relationship between the item and people who make or use it. You do this by referring to its cultural, political, economic, and historical significance.*

a) How to Describe an Artefact:

A description is a narrative that creates a detailed verbal picture of the object. The first steps to describing your object, require you attend to its physicality. That is: what it is made of and what it looks like. The second step is to determine what material(s) it is made of, its dimensions, its shape, weight, texture, colouring, durability, biodegradability, condition etc, – in short, detail as many of its physical or material characteristics that you can.

b) How to Situate the Artefact Within Social Life:

Situating an object in social life requires you turn your attention to its purpose/function, or how it is/was used in daily life. Your goal here is to explain not only the purpose it was created for, but its social significance too. This means you need to ensure that you situate or locate the object into the time, place and culture, whilst also thinking about the object's political and economic life. Therefore, make sure you mention all of the following:

- **Cultural** – refers to its place in a culture (not a country), a culture. This means you need to say which culture it emerges from, as well as its significance to that cultural.
- **Political** – refers to the social power it exerts, holds or embodies, its influence on society and how it bestows status and or renown.
- **Economic** - refers to its place and value in the exchange system it is part of. You should explain what value it holds and also perhaps how its value has changed or changes over time.
- **Historical** – refers to temporality. This means you need to place it into a time and explore its influence in that time.

Questions you *might* want to find answers to:

- Did a significant social, cultural, and/or political-economic context produce this object?
- Who created or invented it, how is it produced, and for whom or to what end (or as a response to what)?
- What demographic does it appeal to?
- What economic value does it hold?
- What social value does it embody?
- What cultural value does it signify?
- Can you imagine the steps of its social life from its current condition?
- What structural, political or economic determinants, if any, constrained or influenced its production?
- How has the item been marketed, distributed, removed from circulation, exhibited?
- Is it decorated? What is the significance of the decoration?
- How does the material the item is made from contribute to its function and effects?