Sample Lesson 4: Visual Literacy (2 sessions)

Overview: Acquiring Visual Literacy: Learning to Look and Describe

Researchers using ethnographic objects in museum collections need to understand how much they can learn directly from looking closely at an object. Each object in a museum collection was made in particular way and with specific materials. Similarly, each object shows patterns of wear that indicate use as well as other evidence of what has happened to the object since it was collected. In addition, many anthropological museum collections contain decorative elements, but these elements may be part of a single coherent motif or discrete independent units. While from detailed examination researchers can never know everything about an object’s manufacture, use, symbolic significance, and social life as a thing, such a visual examination can tell us a great deal and can offer many hypotheses that can be tested with other collections. This lesson is aimed at learning to see objects, using what we can see to interpret as much as we can about the object’s social life as a thing.

Goals:
- to learn the information that objects can tell us.
- to gain familiarity with the different kinds of materials that are used in ethnographic museum collections.
- to understand how researchers can perceive designs, decorative elements, and general visual motifs.
- to gain skills in interpreting the past uses of objects
- to learn strategies for recognizing the most likely uses of objects from wear patterns
- to distinguish evidence of ethnographic use from post-collection wear patterns

Session Outline
This session will be a hands-on opportunity for students to interact with objects. Faculty will select two groups of objects. The first, consisting of 10 objects from three or four different regions, will be used by faculty for didactic presentations of strategies to understand the stories that objects can tell. The second group of 20 objects will be used by students (in pairs) to practice on their own the strategies presented by faculty. At the end of the session each pair of students will present what they have learned about the two or three objects they have analyzed.

Specific session tasks will include:
- sketching an object and making a digital image of the same object
- identifying the materials used in an object
- inferring methods of manufacture and the kinds of tools used to make the object
- identifying and interpreting use-wear
- recognizing likely post-collection changes: wear, abrasions, repairs, etc.
- inferring meaningful design elements and broader motifs
- strategizing about what can be learned from similar objects from other collections
Summary Discussion:
- how individual objects can tell researchers about their manufacture, use, and social life
- strategies for efficiently decoding wear, materials, and methods of manufacture
- beginning points for recognizing design patterns and motifs
- differences between hands-on study and study based on photographs of objects