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# Chairs R Us



# Lesson 5

## Grades: Fourth & Up

**Overview:** This lesson engages students in critical thinking about chairs. A chair, perhaps the most common form of furniture, has a story to tell. A chair from another time and place can tell a lot about the person or persons who made it and who used it. Chairs in our own homes can communicate a lot about how we live, work and interact today. In this lesson, students practice 1) observing chairs and 2) using their observations as evidence to support an opinion or interpretation about the people who made or owned the chair. They get a taste of what highly skilled “material culture” professionals do when they decipher the complex information contained in objects from the past. The critical thinking skills of *observing* and *using observations as evidence* to support an opinion are the focus of this lesson.

## Estimated No. of Class Periods: 2

### Resources/ Materials in Kit:

- 1) Five visuals of five different chairs
  - Dressing Chair (also called “Valet Chair”)
  - Commode Chair (later called “Potty Chair”)
  - Director’s Chair
  - Thomas Day Rocking Chair
  - Thomasville Chair
- 2) *Take the Chair!* by Sally Gant, Museum of Early Southern Decorative Arts (MESDA)
- 3) Post cards of historical rooms from MESDA. See: pouch
- 4) Reading Chairs (handout)

### Resources/Materials to Get:

- 1) A director’s chair (see photo of a “director’s chair” in kit)

### Prerequisites:

Kit Lesson 2: Trees and Woods of the South. A familiarity with different kinds of joints. See hand-out, “Simple Joints,” in Lesson 3.

### Focus Questions:

- Why is it important to think critically about objects made or used by people?
- Why is it important to base opinions and judgments on hard evidence?
- How do artifacts like antique furniture tell us about how people lived in the past?
- What can we learn about ourselves by studying the furniture we use today?

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## Learning Outcomes

After completing this lesson the students will:

1. Carefully observe a man made object (like a chair or other piece of furniture ) and be able to describe it in pictures and words (i.e., record or report factual evidence).
2. Use observation/s as evidence to support an *opinion* or *interpretation* about how the object was used and/or how it reflects the person who made it or the people who used it (i.e., interpret and make inferences).
3. Recognize that man-made objects - like furniture - are primary sources of information that tell us about the people who made and used them.

## Vocabulary

**artifact** – an object made or modified by a person or persons; furniture is an artifact, because it is made by people; a piece of wood that has *not* been changed by a person is a “natural object”

**material culture** – refers to artifacts like furniture, farm tools, toys, buttons, arrowheads, appliances, ceramics, houses, buildings or any thing made or modified by man. Artifacts are used as sources of information about the behavior/s and social patterns of a society or community and are used to interpret values, belief systems, ideas or attitudes. As Jules Prown, noted art historian, stated: “the term *material culture* thus refers to both the subject matter of the study, *material*, and to its purpose, the understanding of *culture*.”

**natural object** – a thing that occurs in nature; seashells and bones are natural objects; however, if a shell or bone has been fashioned by a person(s) into a tool or a piece of jewelry, it becomes an artifact

**primary sources** – written, oral or visual documents or other evidence (i.e., **artifacts**) created during the historical period being studied or by individual participants who witnessed or remembered the event. It is from these primary sources that historians determine what happened in the past.

**secondary sources** – recreations of the past based on primary sources; secondary sources are things like history books, articles about historical events, or documentary films

## Suggested Instructional Steps

1. Ask the following question and makes a list of student responses:  
“How do we learn about how people lived in a particular time and place in the past ?”  
Answers might include - *books, legal records and documents, newspapers* , information passed down through *word of mouth*, etc. If a student mentions that we can learn from “*things* from the past,” that’s great!
2. Show the list and ask: What do most of these ways of learning about the past have in common? (Answer: They mostly involve written or spoken *language*).
3. *Explain:*

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We can also learn about the past from studying *man-made* objects. When we study man-made objects and things to learn about the past, that study is called “material culture.” *Explore*: Has anyone ever made a time capsule. What was the purpose of burying everyday things in the ground? What could kids in the future learn by looking at the things in the time capsule you buried?

4. What are some professions in which people study things people *made* and *used*?  
(Possible answers: anthropologists, archaeologists, folklorists, art historians, antique specialists, etc. Note: If students mention professions such as paleontologist, ask the question: “Are bones *man-made*?” No; they are natural objects. Bones are *not* material culture, unless they are modified by a person or persons into jewelry, tools, etc.)
5. To be able to “read” and “interpret” things made and used by people in the past, *first* we must be able to *observe* the object carefully and *describe* in detail what we see.

### Practicing Observing (Describing what we see)

6. Show the students an actual “director’s chair” (Note: Obtain a director’s chair similar to the white chair in the photograph in this lesson or another type of common, everyday chair that you can easily get.)

*Ask*: How many of you have seen one of these before? Tell students that, in this exercise, you want them to *really look* at this object (director’s chair) and to describe what they see in words. Drawing the object may also help students to really observe it closely.

(*Note*: If students want to talk about the chair’s function and their own experiences with this type of chair, emphasize that *first* we want to gather evidence by describing *just what we see*.)

### Example of List of Observations

*Ask students*: Describe what you see when you look at this object.

(Students use their own words to describe).

- it’s made out of light wood (looks like pine) cloth, and metal for hinges
- the fabric used on it is tough canvas
- the fabric is attached to the wooden pieces to make a seat and a back
- canvas is faded
- the fabric on the seat is attached to long, round sticks (dowels) at both sides and the dowels slide into a long hole on both ends
- it’s made out of different pieces of wood (sticks) that are joined together
- most of the sticks or pieces of wood are long and square shaped; the front and back legs are joined together by two long pieces of wood that are circular or cylindrical
- the arms are tapered from front to back

- the two pieces of wood that make the back of the chair are different in shape than any of the other pieces - they look like they have been carved, or “turned;” there are little balls or notches at the top of each of the back pieces; the balls keep the canvas from slipping off

*Explain:* “Now let’s practice using *the observations* as evidence to support an opinion or interpretation about the people who either made, used or use the chair.”

## Practice Using Observations as Evidence

7. *Ask:* What kind of object is it? How do you know?

(*Note:* Encourage students to use their observations of the chair as evidence for their opinions or interpretations about the people who *made* the chair or *use/used* it.)

8. *Summarize:*

Observations	Provides Evidence for:	Opinion/Interpretation
• hinges that make it “fold up”	supports:	• chair is made so people can move it around from place to place
• canvas seat and back	supports:	• it is waterproof and durable; it is for outdoors; made for heavy use
• faded canvas – looks washed or bleached by the sun	supports:	• exposed to elements; people have used it out-of-doors.
• construction – no dovetails or fancy joinery or wood work; made of common pine	supports:	• not “fine” furniture and does not use rare, expensive wood; cheap to make
• very simply made with sticks of wood joined together	supports:	• maker is not highly skilled; easy to put together by low-skilled craftsperson(s)

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People who study chairs and objects are seeing chairs as “material culture.” In other words, they study culture – how people live/d, work/ed, and interact/ed – by interpreting “material” or concrete things. This includes all the things people make and modify to provide food, clothing and shelter for their survival and comfort. Material cultural professionals are like detectives, because they figure out what people were like in the past by looking for clues in the objects that were part of their everyday lives. Now, we’re going to practice thinking critically about chairs with an activity called “Reading Chairs.”

## Activity

Provide students photos in the kit of chairs. Have students complete the handout, “Reading Chairs,” independently or in groups. When this exercise is complete, discuss the answers with the students.

### Answer Key

- 1) **Answer:** The Thomasville Chair (The chair on the pedestal; it is a huge sign that symbolizes that Thomasville, N.C., is a furniture-making center).
- 2) **Answer:** The director’s chair. It looks like it is made for the outdoors (canvas back, easy to fold up, very portable etc.).
- 3) **Answer:** The Thomasville Chair. It is obvious that it is on a huge pedestal like a statue.
- 4) **Answer:** The chair that the man is getting clothes out of. This chair is more for holding and hanging clothes than for sitting. The seat lifts up to hold clothes. This was the explanation provided by the person who sold the chair. Someone else suggested it might have been used in a church with the seatbox used to hold a book. Which explanation do you believe is accurate and why?
- 5) **Answer:** Thomas Day Rocking chair. Its main distinctive feature are rockers that enable it to rock back and forth.
- 6) **Answer:** Rocking chair. It was made by Thomas Day. The little protrusions on the arms that are shaped like two “thumbs” are a unique decorative feature Thomas Day often used on furniture. Do you think the thumbs had a function or do you think they are purely decorative?
- 7) **Answer:** Commode Chair or “potty” chair.
- 8) **Answer:** Student’s choice

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## Assessment

When discussing the activity with the students, determine:

- ✓ Does each student demonstrate the ability to *observe* furniture and describe it in detail?
- ✓ Does each student demonstrate the ability to *use his or her observations* as evidence to support opinions and hunches about the uses of the furniture and social patterns it suggests?

## Extension A

Have students make up their own questions about the chairs referred to in the “Reading Chairs” exercise.

## Extension B

This activity encourages students to think critically about how the furniture in their own homes reflects how people live today.

### What Can I Learn From the Furniture Used to Watch TV?

Have students take an inventory of furniture they use to sit in or recline on when watching TV, i.e., chairs, sofas, beds, etc. (If students have more than one TV, have them focus on the room where they personally watch TV the most.) The purpose of this exercise is to show students that by analyzing the furniture people use for a particular activity (watching TV), we can learn a lot about the “social pattern” of TV watching and related behaviors.

### Data Collection

- List pieces of furniture used for sitting/reclining when watching TV
- Draw the location and orientation of *all* furniture in the room used for watching TV
- Make observations and *describe in detail* the furniture *you* (the student) use the most when you watch TV. Describe it in detail, as we did in the first exercise with the “director’s chair.” What does it look like? What’s it made out of? Is it upholstered? Is it wooden/metal? Is it comfortable? Is it new or well worn? Do you lie on the floor and rest your feet on a piece of furniture or do you sit or lie in it?

### Data Analysis

- When students bring in the data they have collected about furniture they use for TV viewing, compile the information about the furniture in a chart or database. Referring to the chart, explore these kinds of questions with students:
  - What room/s do students in this class use the most for watching TV?
  - What kind of furniture does this class use the most/least for watching TV?
  - Does the furniture used for watching TV suggest that TV watching is a formal or informal kind of activity? How do you know? Does the furniture give us any clues about the behaviors people engage in when

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watching TV? (i.e., if there are TV trays in front of the TV chairs, this might suggest that the people in that household eat meals while viewing TV; if the TV's in the bedroom facing the bed, this might suggest that TV watching is related to relaxing or sleeping).

*These activities encourage students to think critically about how furniture reflects how people lived in the past:*

- Show students the post cards of rooms in homes that are recreated at the Museum of Early Southern Decorative Arts (or use photos from period-accurate rooms in your state). Have students practice thinking critically about the furniture and the rooms they see. What does the furniture in each room suggest about the people who live in these rooms? Do they seem rich/poor? How can you tell? What stands out the most to you in each room? Why does it stand out? What does it tell you about the people who lived in the room?
- Take a field trip to a historical home or site with period-accurate rooms. Have students think critically about the furniture and the rooms they see and have them formulate opinions about the people who lived in those rooms, based on the evidence the furniture provides (or use other examples from your state of period accurate rooms; i.e., Colonial Williamsburg; Historic Columbia; Old World Wisconsin; historic sites in Charleston, S.C., etc.).