

Tracing Histories Through Artifacts: Analyzing and Preserving Vietnamese Refugee Material Culture

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Grades: 9–12	
Subjects:	Social Studies, History
Standards:	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• HSS 11.9• HSS 11.11• RI.11–12.7• W.9–10.7• SL.9–10.1
Key Question:	How do artifacts help convey Vietnamese refugee experiences, and why is it important to digitally preserve both artifacts and their stories?
Skills:	This lesson plan engages students in historical thinking skills by requiring them to analyze artifacts, question sources, and evaluate the role of preservation in shaping historical narratives through: <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Sourcing and contextualization2. Corroboration and multiple perspectives3. Research analysis4. Use of evidence and argumentation
Suggested Duration:	60–75 minutes
Class size:	Up to 58 students, with each student assigned a unique artifact from our digital collections. However, artifacts can be analyzed individually, in pairs, or in small groups, allowing multiple students to examine the same artifact if needed.

Learning Objectives:

By the end of the lesson, students will be able to:

- Apply archaeological research methodologies to analyze artifacts from members of the diasporic Vietnamese community worldwide.
- Articulate the importance of artifacts in preserving and conveying historical narratives.
- Recognize the challenges associated with preserving refugee artifacts and their historical significance.

- Evaluate the role of digital preservation in protecting and providing access to refugee artifacts over time.

Key Terms:

- **Archaeology:** The study of past human life through material remains.
- **Archive:** A collection of historical documents, records, or artifacts preserved for research and reference.
- **Artifact:** An object made or used by people at any given time.
- **Provenance:** The history of where an artifact comes from and how it was used.
- **Context:** The location and surroundings in which an artifact was found, which helps determine its significance.
- **Digital Preservation:** The process of using digital tools to document, store, and make artifacts accessible for future generations.
- **Material Culture:** The physical objects, artifacts, and materials created, used, or valued by a society, reflecting its history, beliefs, and daily life.
- **Metadata:** Information stored about an artifact (e.g., date, material, origin, historical context) that helps identify, organize, and preserve it.
- **Refugee:** A person forced to flee their home due to conflict, persecution, or disaster, seeking safety elsewhere.

Materials/Acknowledgments

Materials Needed:

1. Laptop or device with internet access
2. Writing utensils
3. Printed **Artifact Analysis Worksheet** (see attached template) or blank paper for notes

Acknowledgements:

All artifacts for this lesson are sourced from the Refugee Material Culture Initiative (RMCI), a UCLA digital archaeology lab led by Professor Kelly Nguyen. RMCI digitizes and preserves artifacts from the diasporic Vietnamese community worldwide, expanding access and overcoming barriers to their visibility and study. The Vietnamese Heritage Museum (VHM) is RMCI's community partner and primary artifact source.

Background Information

This lesson introduces students to artifacts as historical evidence, focusing on Vietnamese refugee artifacts and the challenges of interpreting them without documentation or oral histories. Unlike traditional archaeological finds, refugee artifacts are often scattered across countries and generations, making their significance harder to determine. Without proper records, they risk being misunderstood, lost, or devalued.

To address these challenges, digital preservation is essential. Institutions like the Refugee Material Culture Initiative (RMCI) digitize and catalog these artifacts, ensuring accessibility for research and public engagement. By combining traditional artifact analysis with digital tools—such as metadata, macro photography, and oral history archives—scholars can preserve not only the objects themselves but also the personal stories attached to them.

This lesson can be adapted to fit various ethnic studies, history, or social science curricula, particularly in units on migration, diaspora, or material culture studies. Teachers may adjust the focus based on available resources—for example, highlighting artifacts related to other displaced communities or integrating local museum collections. Additionally, incorporating digital artifact databases enhances accessibility, making the lesson more adaptable for classrooms with limited physical resources. This framework allows educators to adapt the lesson to teaching objectives, student interests, and available resources while adhering to California's educational standards in critical thinking and historical analysis.

Lesson Plan: Analyzing and Preserving Vietnamese Refugee Material Culture

1. Preparation (Before Class)

Ask students at least one day before the lesson to reflect on the following question:

- *"If you had to leave your home suddenly, unsure if you would ever return, and could only take one object with you, what would it be?"*

Pre-Class Assignment:

- Students should either **bring their chosen object to class** or **upload a photo** (without a description) to a designated course page before the lesson.
- The object should be something they would take if they had to leave home as a refugee.
- Emphasize: There are no right or wrong answers—students should choose an item that holds personal significance to them.

2. Lesson Introduction: Refugee Object Exchange Activity (15 minutes)

This activity challenges students to interpret artifacts without prior context, mirroring the difficulties historians face in studying material culture. By analyzing a classmate's chosen object, students will explore how artifacts hold personal and historical significance and why preserving both objects and their stories is essential in historical research and archiving.

Step 1: Object Exchange & Observation (7 Minutes)

- Have students exchange objects with the person sitting next to them (or assign them a classmate's digital object if using an online platform).
- Each student will receive an object that is not their own and observe it carefully.
- Students analyze their assigned object by considering:
 - *What material is it made of?*
 - *What might this object be used for?*
 - *Why do you think someone would bring this with them if they had to leave home?*

Students should write down their best guess about what the artifact is and why their classmate may have chosen this object.

Step 2: Partner Discussion (4 Minutes)

- Students discuss their observations with their partner, explaining what they think the object is, its purpose, and why it might have been chosen.
- The actual owner then shares their real reason for selecting the object.

Step 3: Whole-Class Discussion (4 minutes)

- After students have shared with their partners, bring the class together and guide the discussion using reflective questions that encourage deeper thinking about what they learned:
 - *Did your assumptions about the object's significance change after hearing its true story? How?*
 - *Was it easier or harder than you expected to figure out why someone might bring a certain object? Why?*
 - *Did your perspective on your own object change after seeing how someone else analyzed it?*
 - *Why do you think some objects are easier to understand than others? What kinds of objects might be misunderstood without explanation?*

3. Teacher Mini-Lecture: How do we study refugee artifacts? (25 minutes)

Begin by asking students:

- What comes to mind when you hear the word “artifact”?
- What kinds of objects do you think archaeologists study?

Allow a few responses, and encourage students to think beyond ancient history—artifacts are not just relics of the distant past but also objects used in contemporary contexts.

Explain:

- Material culture (physical artifacts) provides evidence of refugee experiences in ways that written histories may not.
- Not all artifacts survive—some are lost, destroyed, or forgotten. Those that remain carry powerful stories, but their true significance can only be understood if we can uncover the context surrounding them.
- We uncover this context not only through traditional scientific methods but also by collaborating with artifact donors and/or their descendant communities.

Part 1: How Archaeologists & Archivists Analyze Artifacts

Introduce the different methods researchers use to study artifacts. As you discuss each method, project an image of a Vietnamese refugee artifact (available in the ‘Collections’ tab on the Refugee Material Culture Initiative site). Guide students in relevant artifact analysis methodologies to the projected artifact by either raising their hand or discussing in small groups. Have them examine the artifact’s material, function, provenance, context, and supporting documentation using the following framework:

1. *Physical & Material Analysis* (an artifact's physical characteristics, including its composition, structure, and any visible wear patterns)
 - a. What is it made of?
 - b. Is there any writing, symbols, or markings on it?
 - c. Are there signs of repeated use, modification, or repair?
2. *Function/Symbolism* (an artifact's intended purpose and/or actual use)
 - a. How was it used?
 - b. Did its function change over time?
3. *Provenance* (the history of ownership of an artifact, from its creation to the present)
 - a. Where was this artifact originally found?
 - b. Has it been moved from its original location?
 - c. If displaced, how did it travel from one place to another?
4. *Context* (the place where an artifact is found)
 - a. What other objects were found near it (or typically associated with it)?
 - b. How does its location affect its interpretation?
 - c. Was this artifact intentionally preserved or later rediscovered? What could this information tell you about the artifact and/or those who interacted with it?
5. *Narrative & Perspective* (when available, records that provide historical and contextual information about an artifact)
 - a. Are there any written records, oral histories, or other archival materials associated with this artifact?
 - b. How does this documentation help us understand artifacts beyond their physical form?

Encourage students to consider how different types of analysis work together to reveal the projected artifact's true meaning. Each method—physical and material analysis, function, provenance, context, and supporting documentation—offers a different piece of the puzzle. Relying on just one approach risks missing key insights or misinterpreting the artifact's significance.

- Provide an example using the artifact you have chosen. For instance, Bắc Phong Từ Võ Hạnh's aluminum comb may initially appear to be a simple grooming tool. However, through material analysis, we find that it is made of aluminum with edges too sharp for practical use. Investigating its provenance—its creation in a prison re-education camp—transforms its meaning from a basic hygiene item to a symbol of survival and resilience.

By combining different analytical methods, we can gain a deeper and more accurate understanding of an artifact's significance.

Part 2: The Importance of the Material Record in Vietnamese Refugee Artifacts

Explain that refugee artifacts differ from traditional archaeological finds because forced displacement scatters them across borders and generations, making them more vulnerable to gaps in the material and historical record. Unlike settled societies with preserved structures and

extensive documentation, refugee histories are often fragmented—objects are lost, records are destroyed, and migration scatters communities across borders.

Ask students to reflect:

1. Why might some refugee artifacts be preserved while others are lost or forgotten?
2. How do objects help tell stories that might not be recorded in written histories?
3. What happens if we lose access to the people who originally owned these artifacts?

Connect these questions back to the key idea: *that studying refugee artifacts while donors and their descendant communities are still present is crucial to responsibly preserving these histories*. Unlike ancient artifacts reconstructed without living witnesses, Vietnamese refugee artifacts often maintain direct connections to their original owners. Collaborating with Vietnamese community donors and their descendant communities can ensure that artifacts are preserved with respect and that their stories remain accurate and meaningful.

Part 3: The Role of Digital Archives: Why There Is a Need to Digitize

Begin by asking the class:

"Why do you think it's important to preserve artifacts? What challenges might exist in keeping them safe over time?"

Pause for responses. If students need guidance, prompt them with follow-up questions:

1. *What happens to objects over time?*
 - *Can paper documents, textiles, or other artifacts last forever?*
 - *What factors might cause them to fade, wear down, or be lost?*
 - **Key idea:** Artifacts deteriorate—the writings on paper documents fade, fabrics wear down, and personal belongings can be lost over time.
2. *Can we display every artifact in a museum?*
 - *Have you ever been to a museum? Were all its artifacts on display?*
 - *What do you think happens to artifacts that don't fit in exhibition spaces?*
 - **Key idea:** Limited display space in museums and collections means that not all artifacts can be physically exhibited at once, leaving many important objects stored away and inaccessible to the public.
3. *Can everyone visit artifacts in person?*
 - *What if an important artifact is housed in another country or a private collection—how would you access it?*
 - *Are there financial or institutional barriers that might prevent some people from visiting museum collections?*
 - **Key idea:** Visiting artifacts in person may not always be feasible due to geographic, financial, or institutional barriers.
4. *Would you be willing to give up a meaningful family heirloom?*
 - *If you owned an object with deep personal significance, would you feel comfortable donating it to a museum? Why or why not?*

- *How might digitization offer a way to preserve and share an artifact without physically giving it away?*
- **Key idea:** Some individuals may hesitate to part with meaningful objects.

Build on the class discussion about the challenges in preserving the material record to explore how digitization can help resolve some of these issues—or, in some cases, amplify or introduce new challenges. Refer to the following points as examples of how digitization can help, but allow for additional commentary as the class discussion evolves organically:

1. Digital archives enable broader virtual exhibitions, allowing a greater number of artifacts—regardless of size or fragility—to be viewed and studied.
2. Digital preservation creates high-resolution scans, 3D models, and metadata records, ensuring these artifacts remain accessible even if the originals fade or degrade over time.
3. Online collections provide global access, allowing students, educators, researchers, and communities to explore Vietnamese refugee artifacts remotely.
4. Digitization allows artifacts to be shared more widely without requiring individuals to physically part with them.

Introduce digital preservation tools used by archivists:

- *Macro Photography* – Captures close-up images that reveal fine details, such as the stitching on a hand-sewn áo dài.
- *3D Scanning & Modeling* – Creates interactive digital replicas of artifacts, preserving their form and structure for virtual exploration.
- *Metadata* – Provides detailed information about an artifact, document, or digital file, helping researchers, archivists, and the public understand and locate it. In archaeology and archival work, metadata is essential for organizing and preserving artifacts in digital collections.
- *Oral Histories* – Records refugee voices alongside their artifacts, preserving personal narratives and cultural context.

4. Student Activity: Digital Artifact Investigation (20 minutes)

Students will analyze a Vietnamese refugee artifact from [the RMCI digital collections](#) using an artifact analysis framework. Their observations will be recorded in an **Artifact Analysis Worksheet**, helping them apply different methodologies to interpret the artifact's significance.

Instructions:

1. **Select an Artifact**
 - Students will navigate the RMCI digital collection independently and select an artifact for analysis.
 - This can be done individually, in pairs, or in small groups, depending on student and teacher preferences.

2. Investigate Using the Framework

- Students will examine the artifact through five key categories and document their findings on the Artifact Analysis Worksheet:
 - *Physical & Material Analysis* – What is it made of? Are there any markings, symbols, or signs of wear?
 - *Function* – How was it used? Did its function change over time? Was it a survival tool, a cultural object, or something sentimental?
 - *Provenance* – Where was it originally found or acquired? How did it travel from place to place?
 - *Context* – Was it intentionally preserved, or was it rediscovered? What other objects might have been found with it?
 - *Supporting Documentation* – Are there any written records, oral histories, or metadata that provide additional context?

3. Group Discussion & Interpretation

- After completing the worksheet, students will compare their findings with a partner or small group. Encourage students to reflect on their observations and interpretations using the following questions:
 - *What details stood out to you the most about this artifact?*
 - *What were your initial assumptions about the artifact? Did your interpretation change after examining it more closely?*
 - *What additional information would help us understand this artifact better?*
 - *How does digitization impact the way we study and engage with this artifact?*

4. Reflection & Whole-Class Discussion

- Bring the class together and invite students to share insights from their small group conversations with the rest of the class.

5. Assessments

Students will submit their Artifact Analysis Worksheets as documentation of their investigation.

For further reflection, students may also submit a two-page written response addressing the following questions:

1. How did analyzing the artifact through different methods change your understanding of it?
 2. What are the benefits and limitations of studying artifacts digitally rather than in person?
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Multilingual Learner Supports

This lesson incorporates scaffolding strategies to ensure ESL (English as a Second Language) students can fully engage with the content while building academic vocabulary and historical thinking skills. Below are key supports included in the lesson:

1. Vocabulary Reinforcement

- *Pre-teach Key Terms*: Before the lesson, introduce essential vocabulary (artifact, provenance, material culture, preservation, digital archive) using visual aids, definitions, and examples to support comprehension.
- *Word Banks & Sentence Stems*: Provide a word bank of key terms and sentence frames (e.g., "This artifact is made of _____. It might have been used for ____ because ____.") to guide student responses.

2. Visual Learning

- *Display Artifact Photography*: Digital artifact analysis includes high-quality images and interactive 3D models, helping students engage with objects regardless of language barriers.
- *Graphic Organizers & Worksheets*: The Artifact Analysis Worksheet includes structured prompts that help students organize their observations and thoughts clearly.
- *Demonstrations*: The teacher models artifact analysis with a projected artifact, guiding students through the process step by step before they work independently.

3. Peer Collaboration

- *Pair & Group Work*: The Refugee Object Exchange Activity ensures students collaborate with peers, providing natural language practice while supporting meaning-making through discussion.
- *Multimodal Expression*: Students can explain artifacts through speaking, writing, drawing, or using sentence starters, accommodating different language proficiency levels.
- *Think-Pair-Share*: Before whole-class discussions, students first reflect individually and discuss with a partner, allowing ESL students to build confidence before sharing with the class.

4. Inclusive Instruction

- The lesson plan validates multilingual learners' cultural backgrounds by allowing them to share and analyze objects that hold personal or familial significance.
- *Encourage Multilingual Perspectives*: When possible, invite students to share personal or family stories in their preferred language alongside an English explanation to provide deeper context for their chosen artifact.

5. Assessment Accommodations

- To provide flexibility for the written reflection of the assessment, ESL students can:
- ◆ Write in short paragraphs, bullet points, or labeled diagrams.
 - ◆ Provide oral responses recorded on a device.

For additional guidance around scaffolding for multilingual learners, please consult the following resources:

- English Learner Toolkit of Strategies,
<https://ucdavis.box.com/s/ujkdc2xp1dqjzrlq55czph50c3sq1ngu>
- Providing Appropriate Scaffolding,
<https://www.sdcoe.net/educators/multilingual-education-and-global-achievement/oracy-to-olkit/providing-appropriate-scaffolding#scaffolding>
- Strategies for ELD, <https://ucdavis.box.com/s/dcp15ymah51uwizpmm2vys5zr2r5reu>
- ELA / ELD Framework,
<https://www.caeducatorstogether.org/resources/6537/ela-eld-framework>
- California ELD Standards,
<https://ucdavis.box.com/s/vqn43cd632z22p8mfzn2h7pntc71kb02>

References

- Analysis of artifacts was informed by the following sources:
 - National Archives and Records Administration. (2023). Analyze an artifact (intermediate). U.S. National Archives. Retrieved from <https://www.archives.gov/education/lessons/worksheets/analyze-an-artifact-intermediate>
 - Washington State Historical Society. (2021, August 19). *Caring for Vietnamese refugee artifacts: A behind-the-scenes look* [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cDRfoH6ZiEw>
- For more information on the Refugee Material Culture Initiative (RMCI), see:
 - Refugee Material Culture Initiative. (n.d.). *About RMCI*. UCLA. Retrieved from <https://dal.ucla.edu/rmci/node/2>
 - UCLA International Institute. (2023). *Digitizing Vietnamese refugee artifacts at UCLA*. Retrieved from <https://international.ucla.edu/institute2/article/283791>
- For more information on RMCI's community partner, the Vietnamese Heritage Museum, and to explore its digital collections, visit:
 - Vietnamese Heritage Museum. (n.d.). *Artifacts Collection*. Retrieved from <https://vietnamesemuseum.org/our-projects/artifacts-collection/>