

Gonville & Caius

UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE

History Essay Prize 2020

The task is to write a 'biography', between 500 and 1,000 words, of any object in historical context. Any object with a history, even a recent history, can be chosen – from an ancient Roman mirror to an early modern leather shoe; from a rotary dial telephone to a microwave; from a Georgian royal bed to an IKEA sofa. The object can be related to a topic within your A-level/IB syllabus or can be from an entirely new period and from anywhere in the world. You are at liberty to choose any object – it doesn't need to be in a museum or formal institutional setting and could be an ordinary object from your home.

Object biography is one way through which historians have tried to understand the individual 'life' of an object – who made it and how it was made, who bought or owned it, and how did it find its way to a museum or collection? But, for many objects, the documents required to tell that life-story are not available, especially for objects which were not part of elite or literate cultures. Object biography is therefore also a way to think more generally about the place of kinds of objects within history - at the point of production and consumption, in relation to gender or family relationships, or as part of the history of collection. You might also want to reflect on what studying an object in this way adds to our understanding of history compared to studying other kinds of sources.

The judges will be looking for creativity in the choice of the object and its interpretation, as well as perceptive analysis and effective and expressive writing. You should also list any primary and secondary sources that you have used. Please provide an image of the object or a link to where it is held along with a short description of the object including the date and place of its production, if known, what it is made out of, its dimensions, and current location. (Please note – the bibliography and the object description do not count towards your overall prescribed word count of 1,000).

For some object biographies, see:

<https://web.prm.ox.ac.uk/rpr/index.php/object-biography-index/19-prmcollection/200-1884323-nuer-headaddress.html>

<http://blogs.ucl.ac.uk/eicah/the-attar-casket-of-tipu-sultan/>

<http://www.fitzmuseum.cam.ac.uk/gallery/treasuredpossessions/curatorschoice/index.html>

<http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O21635/polypropylene-chair-mark-ii-chair-day-robin/>

<https://www.concealedgarments.org/cache/28578/>

<http://www.historyworkshop.org.uk/category/radical-objects/>

An example of a short object description is as follows:

Pair of shoes, 1550-1600. Black leather with slashes, found under the floor of the Shoe-maker's Room, Old Court, Corpus Christi, Cambridge, in 1852. Right shoe 25.4 x 10.1 cm and left shoe 26 x 9.8 cm. Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, University of Cambridge.

Please submit your entry in electronic form (as a PDF) to schoolsprizes@cai.cam.ac.uk.

Please do not put your name or your school's name on your entry, but instead complete a cover sheet (Word/PDF). This completed coversheet must be sent along with your submission as a separate file.

Entries should arrive by the deadline of **Friday, 5th June 2020**.

All candidates will be notified of the results of the competition by early September.