

Update to Introduction, *Canada: Face of a Nation*

Artifact Study — The Big Mac Box

Artifacts can be used to better understand the society that produced them. Some artifacts are very elaborate and full of intricate detail. The artifact chosen for this historical analysis is deliberately selected to demonstrate how even something simple and seemingly insignificant can reveal complex cultural insights. We can learn a significant amount about our society (and our contemporary world) by looking carefully at the things that we ordinarily take for granted because they are commonplace. Let us now consider the Big Mac Box, the container for the product that helped build the McDonalds Restaurant empire. Use a box provided by your teacher to conduct the following artifact study.

Questions that a historical “detective” could ask to better understand the artifact and the culture that produced it

1. What does it look like?
2. What does it smell like?
3. What does it feel like?
4. What material was used to make this box?
5. Why was this material chosen?
6. What natural resource was used to make the material for this box?
7. How is it held together?
8. What are its measurements? (Height, width, depth, weight?)
9. Why is it the size it is?
10. How was it made? (Individually or mass produced?)
11. How recognizable is the artifact? How many people do you know who use it?
12. What is its intended purpose or use?
13. How often will it be used?
14. Is it used by a single person or by a group?
15. To what additional uses can it be put?
16. What is done with the box once it has been used? How is it disposed of?
17. What is the environmental impact of its use?
18. How much has the shape of the box been determined by the material used, how it was assembled, and its intended use?
19. With what other materials could the box have been made?
20. What design changes would be required if the box was made from other materials?
21. Does the box work well for its intended purpose?
22. How could the design be improved?
23. Why isn't the box plain white?
24. What is the function of the decoration?
25. What does the lettering and printed text tell you?

26. What do ® and © signify?
27. Why are symbols, logos and trademarks so important in our society?
28. To what degree is the name “Big Mac” a reflection of the fashions of our time?
29. Have you ever seen anything like this being made? What does that suggest about our society?
30. Where was the box made? How do you know?
31. How can you tell it was intended for a Canadian restaurant?
32. Why not just serve a hamburger on a plate?
33. What does the box tell us about how meals are prepared and eaten in our society?
34. What does the Big Mac box tell us about the people who use it?
35. What does it tell us about the people who serve it?
36. What does it tell us about our society in general?

Clearly, from a decorated, disposable cardboard box we are able to obtain some understanding of the prevailing culture in contemporary Canadian society. This understanding helps to define general lifestyles and values. The artifacts we leave behind will help future generations to better understand what we were like as a society. The previous set of 36 questions can be adapted to analyze other artifacts. Develop and answer a set of analytical questions for another cultural artifact of your choosing.

Historical Analysis

1. “Culture is an expression of the lifestyles of a group of people and it must include how they behave and what they believe.” Do you agree with this statement? Explain.
2. Why was “fast food” not available or necessary in Canada prior to the 1950s?
3. Originally the Big Mac was served in a paper wrapper. During the 1980s the Big Mac was served in a pressed polystyrene container. This kept the food warmer but there were environmental problems associated with production and disposal. What does the return to a paper-based container in the 1990s say about changing Canadian social values?
4. What does the decorated, disposable paper hamburger container reveal about contemporary Canadian society from the following perspectives:
 - (a) lifestyle
 - (b) diet
 - (c) attitudes towards conservation
5. What might the hamburger container of the future look like? Explain your design.