mhc am MOUNT HOLYOKE COLLEGE ART MUSEUM

More than Meets the Eye

A DISCOVERY RESOURCE

First impressions can tell you a lot. Looking closely at an object often gives you important insights that you might miss if you jump right to reading about it. The questions on this page will empower you to make your own discoveries about this object before learning more.

This guide is designed to be used with the object pictured to the right and can be enjoyed by all ages. If you are with other people, take turns reading each question out loud to one another and discuss your different responses.

At first glance

- What are your first impressions or thoughts about this object?
- What key words would you use to describe it?

Design

- What shapes and colors do you notice first?
- Is there anything surprising or unexpected about the artist's arrangement of the shapes and colors?
- Do you see any recognizable patterns or structures in the design?

Materials & technique

- What different types of textures do you see (smooth, rough, soft, etc.)?
- From the textures and other details, can you tell what materials, fabric, or clothing are used in this work?
- What do you notice about the way it is made and how the pieces were put together?

Function

- Considering size, materials, and elements of design, does this look like it has an everyday function? If so, what?
- In addition to its practical use, do you think the artist meant it to be beautiful and/or decorative? Why or why not?
- What can you tell about who made this or used it? What do you see that makes you say that?

There is usually more to a story than what we can see with our eyes. Learning about how and why a work was made, as well as its history and the person who made it, can deepen our understanding of what we are looking at.

Find out more

Abstract art or comforting quilt? A first glance at this object might defy our expectation of either category. Mary Lee Bendolph (b. 1935) is an accomplished quiltmaker from the small, historically black community of Gee's Bend, Alabama. To keep their families warm in hard times, Mary Lee Bendolph and the other women of Gee's Bend practiced the art of quiltmaking for generations before their quilts were celebrated as fine art.

Soft blues, ranging from faded lavender to deep indigo, dominate this quilt, while narrow strips of yellow, teal, and bright pink punctuate the composition. Close looking reveals the shapes of back pockets on several of the blue blocks—a hint about the origin of these fabrics. Bendolph, who made this quilt about eleven years after her husband's death, describes her choice of fabric: "Many years ago it was traditional to burn the clothing of the deceased, but I wanted something tangible that I could use to preserve the memories of my husband, so instead of burning his clothes I made this jean and cotton shirt quilt." Bendolph titled the quilt *Ghost Pockets*.

Bendolph adapts traditional quilting motifs but always with her own improvisational style. In using only hand-torn scraps of worn-out or out-of-date clothing—mostly collected from relatives—she creates quilts with strong ties to the past and to individual family members.

Your perspective

- Did anything you read above surprise you or change your thinking about the quilt?
- When you first looked at this object, did you think it was art or a functional object? What do you think now? Can an object be both?
- Now that you know more about this work of art, return to your first impressions. Is there anything in your personal and cultural perspective that led you to make assumptions about the object? How did your perspective impact your initial thoughts?

Make connections

- If you could have this quilt in your own home, would you hang it on the wall or put it on a bed? Why?
- Consider what clothes or fabrics you would use to make a quilt to commemorate a person or an event in your life.
- Share your ideas about these questions, or any other thoughts, via Twitter, Facebook, or Instagram #MHCAMghostpockets #MHCAMpiecetogether