LEARNING TO LOOK:  
OBJECT INVESTIGATION

The National Museum of the American Indian (NMAI) has one of the most extensive collections of Native American arts, objects, and photographs in the world, representing over 12,000 years of history and more than 1,200 indigenous cultures throughout the Americas. The collection represents communities from the entire Western Hemisphere, from the Arctic to the southern tip of South America. Long before their contact with Europeans, Indigenous people populated the Americas and were successful stewards and managers of the land, from the Arctic Circle to Tierra del Fuego. Currently, the museum is committed to expanding its holdings of art by contemporary Native American artists.

Museum staff believe that we are stewards of the collection and have a responsibility to care for and share access to it through a variety of means, including an online collections search, exhibitions, education programs, websites, and publications. The collections and their associated information have remarkable potential for increasing public awareness and comprehension of American Indian arts, lives, cultures, and histories. Learning from museum collections can help students develop critical thinking and communication skills. The diagram below shows one way to start the path to becoming object investigators. It contains four steps:

1. Look – A great way to develop observation skills is to examine an object closely and sketch it. The importance of close observation is essential to learning about any object or work of art.
2. Notice – Ask students to consider what materials it’s made from, how it’s constructed, and what images are represented.
3. Connect – Have students make connections to objects in their own lives. Is this familiar or dissimilar to them?
4. Wonder – What lingering questions do students have about this object that remain unanswered by observing it? How might they learn more?

Encourage your students to share what they drew and wrote. With practice, students will enhance their independent thinking skills and will become accomplished object investigators!

Try these looking activities and resources:

- To empower Native voices in your classroom, check out NMAI’s Native Knowledge 360° Initiative online
- For elementary students, check out Where We Live: A Puzzle Book of American Indian Art in English and español to engage kids in NMAI’s collection.
- Access NMAI’s collection and bring Native American objects into your classroom.

Object Investigation Worksheet

This object was created by the _______________________ Peoples.

**Step 1: Look**
Sketch the object you’ve selected.

**Step 2: Notice**
Thoughtfully notice and describe the details of the object (color, shape, size, materials, weight, texture, scent). What patterns do you see? Are there any materials you recognize?

**Step 3: Connect**
Does this remind you of something in your life? It can be anything. Think outside the box!

**Step 4: Wonder**
What else do you want to know or learn about this object? Do you know who made the object or when it was made?