

A history of the world

100 objects that tell a story

— The British Museum and the BBC

Editorial note: 'A History of the World in 100 Objects' was the most creative, imaginative and dynamic development in primary History Education for thirty years. It ties in perfectly with and supports the government's draft NC for History.

Introduction

P.G. Wodehouse described George MacDonald Fraser's act of creative genius – the Flashman novels – apparently drawn from the family papers of Flashman, the *Tom Brown's Schooldays* bully – as "Now I understand what that 'when a new planet swims into his ken' excitement is all about".

Neil McGregor, Director of the British Museum, has also given us a 'New planet excitement' moment with his concept of taking 100 objects from the British Museum collection as the springboard for 'A History of the World', a large scale project which includes a major series broadcast on Radio 4, CBBC, the World Service, the Nations and English Regions and the Web.

By focusing on things rather than just dates, eras and regions, you realise that the history we were taught at school is simply not adequate any more if we are properly to understand the world in which we live.

Neil McGregor

The Objects

100 objects from the British Museum's collection were selected for the Radio 4 series 'A History of the World in 100 objects', written and narrated by Neil McGregor. These objects cover the broadest possible chronological and geographical period, and told a history of the world from two million years ago to the present day.

'Every object will have been man-made. That is what makes this project different. Most histories are based on documents as sources. This history takes as a starting point that the craft and inspiration involved in making things can reveal history in a different and complementary way.'

Every object revealed a host of different things. There are descriptions of the object but the main focus was on how the object was made, its political, economic and cultural significance and how the object came to be in the collection. There are a hatful of stories and ideas in every programme.

The web allows listeners to deepen their understanding through video and a 'zoom in' facility, listeners using the Internet can examine photos of the 100 objects in intricate detail. And fascinating insights from curators and experts are available across each object's page, to give users the historical context of each item.

The Objects and 100 BBC programmes

- Each object was the subject of a 15-minute BBC Radio 4 programme and related national involvement that fully involved schools and their pupils, i.e. 100 programmes in all.
- Each week of programmes was tied to a particular theme, such as 'After the ice age' or 'Meeting the gods'.
- The BBC series looked at objects from all over the world – and spanned tens of thousands of years of human struggle and achievement.
- All the objects in the series are available to view in the British Museum's permanent galleries. A free map and guide are available to help visitors navigate the collection.

Involving the nation: museums, national outreach and children

The project encouraged listeners to explore not only the global collections of the British Museum but to engage and participate with museums across the country to discover the power of objects.

Museums

As well as the British Museum's 100 objects from the series, hundreds more suggestions have been contributed from over 350 museum venues across the UK, all telling a history of the world from their local perspective. These objects were uploaded to the website and are available to view in each individual venue. Many more joined as the project gained momentum through 2010, with these partnerships reflected across the BBC local websites.

The national digital museum

In an exciting initiative, listeners and viewers were encouraged to offer pictures of objects they own and explain how these objects can help tell a history of the world. This created a unique digital museum online of objects that tell history through the eyes of museums and audiences across the UK.

CBBC and BBC Schools offered a range of activities, lesson plans and history trails for both children and teachers.

Involving children – Relic: Guardians of the Museum

The series will also directly involve children as history detectives. A 13-part CBBC series entitled 'Relic: Guardians of the Museum' broadcast from January 2010 had teams of children facing the challenge of a lifetime. The children visited the Museum at night to unlock the mysteries behind 13 of the objects featured in, and inspired by, the Radio 4 series. Accompanied on their journey through the Museum

by Agatha, a mysterious and ghostly tour guide, the adventurers completed challenges and confronted visions from the past in their quest for answers.

While avoiding the “dark forces” that roam the galleries at night, they discovered the history behind some of the Museum’s most famous exhibits, including the mystery of the Easter Island Statue; how the Rosetta Stone unlocked the secrets of Ancient Egypt and the premonition that led to the discovery of the Sutton Hoo ship burial. Racing against time, their success was rewarded by “Guardianship of the Museum”, if they failed they faced incarceration forever within the Museum walls.

Children can visit the British Museum to see the objects featured in the series and to undertake a series of challenges of their own in the free trails available from the information desk.

Primary School involvement: The British Museum and BBC Learning

BBC Learning helped primary schools to become involved in ‘A History of the World’ by providing exciting lesson plans, generated jointly with the British Museum, relating to 13 objects from ‘Relic: Guardians of the Museum’.

These lessons, designed to engage children in learning about history through objects, was supported with at least one printable worksheet per item. Audio, online and video resources were also be sourced for each object. A parallel offering focused on the local element of the project, providing re-usable templates for local museums and schools to work with.

