A History of the World in 100 Objects

In this book we travel back in time and across the globe, to see how we have shaped our world and been shaped by it over the last two million years. The book tries to tell a history of the world in a way that has not been attempted before, by deciphering the messages which objects communicate across time – messages about peoples and places, environments and interactions, about different moments in history and about our own time as we reflect upon it. These signals from the past – some reliable, some conjectural, many still to be retrieved – are unlike other evidence we are likely to encounter. They speak of whole societies and complex processes rather than individual events, and tell of the world for which they were made.

The history that emerges from these objects will seem unfamiliar to many. There are few well-known dates, famous battles or celebrated incidents. Canonical events – the making of the Roman Empire, the Mongol destruction of Baghdad, the European Renaissance – are not centre stage. They are, however, present, refracted through individual objects. Thus, in my chapter on the ancient inscribed tablet known as the Rosetta Stone, for example, I show that it has played a starring role in three fascinating stories: as a legal document in ancient Egyptian times; as a trophy during the rivalry between the French and the British; and finally as a key to the decipherment of the ancient Egyptian writing system at the end of the nineteenth century.

If you want to tell the history of the whole world, a history that does not unduly privilege one part of humanity, you cannot do it through texts alone, because only some of the world has ever had written records, while most of the world, for most of the time, has not. The clearest example of this asymmetry between literate and non-literate history is perhaps the first encounter between Europeans and Australian aboriginals. From the European side we have eye-witness accounts and scientific reports. From the Australian side, we have only a wooden shield dropped by a man in flight after his first experience of gunshot. If we want to reconstruct what was actually going on that day, the shield must be interrogated and interpreted as deeply and as rigorously as the written reports.

All so much easier said than done. Writing history from the study of texts is a familiar process, and we have centuries of critical apparatus to assist our assessment of written records. We have learnt how to judge their frankness, their distortions, their ploys. With objects, we do of course have structures of expertise – archaeological, scientific, anthropological – which allow us to ask critical questions. But we have to add to that a considerable leap of imagination, returning the artefact to its former life, engaging with it as generously, as poetically, as we can in the hope of winning the insights it may deliver.

One of the characteristics of things is that they change – or are changed – long after they have been created, taking on new meanings that could never have been imagined at the outset. A startlingly large number of our objects bear on them the marks of later events. Sometimes this is merely the damage that comes with time, or from clumsy excavation or forceful removal. But frequently, later interventions were designed deliberately to change meaning or to reflect the pride or pleasures of new ownership. The object becomes a document not just of the world for which it was made, but of the later periods which altered it.

History looks different depending on who you are and where you are looking from. So although all these objects in the book are now in museums, it deliberately includes many different voices and perspectives. It draws on the museums' own experts, but it also presents research and analysis by leading scholars from all over the world, as well as comments by people who deal professionally with objects similar to those discussed. This book also includes voices from the communities or countries where the objects were made, as only they can explain what meanings these things still carry in their homeland. Countries and communities around the world are increasingly defining themselves through new readings of their history, and that history is frequently anchored in such things. So a museum is not just a collection of objects: it is an arena where such issues can be debated and contested on a global scale.

31. What claim does the author make about his book in the first paragraph?

A. It benefits from new evidence that has not been available to previous historians.
B. It looks at history from the point of view of society rather than individuals.
C. It approaches the interpretation of the past from a novel perspective.
D. It re-evaluates the significance of certain events.

32. The Rosetta Stone serves as an example of an object

A. whose meaning has been re-interpreted many times.
B. whose significance has changed over time.
C. which has been fought over for many reasons.
D. which explains key events over various historical periods.

33. The author believes that basing a history of the world on texts alone

A. leads to too many interpretations.
B. distorts oral versions of history.
C. fails to take account of cultural difference.
D. results in a biased view of history.

34. The author says that compared to the interpretation of texts, the interpretation of objects calls for

A. a greater level of intuition.
B. more specialised historical background.
C. a more analytical approach.
D. greater attention to detail.

35. What is the author's attitude to the fact that objects often change over time?

A. He welcomes this as a further layer of significance.
B. He regrets that so many objects have been accidentally damaged.
C. He believes that this makes it easier to judge the importance of the object.
D. He deplores the fact that people have deliberately altered ancient artefacts.

36. Why does the author include comments from people who live in the area where the object was made?

A. They can throw light on its original function.
B. They have the skills needed to re-create it.
C. They help us see it in its wider cultural context.
D. They feel ideas related to it have been neglected.