

## **Interpretive Skills and Frameworks**

by Kim Mattern, from his presentation on April 20, 2006

Life can only be lived forward, and can only be understood backward. It is up to people like us to interpret that which has past.

### **Investigation**

Any investigation especially one with sketchy information needs to be interpreted. Interpretation is a skill. Investigation starts with a framework. The framework is a set of tools. There are many tools available to the investigator. We must know which tools to use.

When dealing with a totally unfamiliar object, one needs a set of guidelines as a basis to start our deductions. This framework will keep us on track, making our investigation much easier. Our framework is a set of tools designed to strategically guide us through the identity process. These tools will help us to logically eliminate errors, (through the process of elimination) and keep us focused and on track to positive identification.

Example: someone gives you an old marble and wants you to give them information about it. If you have reference tools you simply look it up in a marble identification book, and your job may be done. Lets suppose you have no knowledge of such small round objects. You may first get a dictionary or encyclopedia and try to look it up there. Enter the Web. You simply use search engines for (Small round ball), press enter, and viola!

This gives you pertinent information for your investigation. It also gives you some ideas as to where to look next. In addition you may have more information than you want. This is where deduction will come in; of course if you have no knowledge of small round balls, deduction here is pointless. Given the fact that you have at least some knowledge of marbles, you will be left with more information than you need. You will invariably have to sort out all the pertinent information to get to the facts. What kind of material is this marble made of? Stone, clay, wood, ceramic, glass, metal? Each category has its own new set of questions, i.e., What kind of stone, clay, wood, etc The marble is glass. What kind of glass? (Italian) Where is this Italian glass from? (Venice) Approximately how old? (ca.1780s) What manufacturer? (The Calle del Corta glass manufacturer) Sounds simple, doesn't it? Yet it can be exhaustive depending on what you need to

identify, and how thorough an investigation is required. Sometimes our deductions will seem more like an algebraic equation:  $A+X=Y$ .

My field of research is Archaeology, and the tools have not changed very much since man started to dig up relics. However the field has grown. Two centuries ago they were digging up artifacts using the same type tools that are used today. With each new discovery new answers were sought. As time went on people started to specialize in different fields of expertise. Each new discovery would build on the last. Facts would replace speculation, as a broader spectrum of the identification process builds.

### **Evidence Corrects Errors**

From the time when little was known of what was being found, Archaeologist had to speculate on their findings. In other words they were guessing. Many mistakes were made. Most were corrected as new evidence came to light. So the process does not go on without error. Anyone who believes that error is failure is dead wrong. Error is intrinsic to the process of elimination. Most great discoveries are built upon failure. It is, in essence, a start in a new direction. It does take time to eliminate or correct these errors.

As an example the Atl-Atl weight is a stone tool that is usually drilled through the middle. It is a curious tool that comes in many shapes and sizes. There were many speculative uses for this artifact. It was first recognized as a "Banner stone" that was supposedly attached to a staff, or standard, as a mark or banner to identify the holder or a group behind the standard. As was common of the battle standard carried by units of an army.

The error was discovered during an excavation of a rock shelter where the stone was found still attached to the original shaft of a primitive spear-throwing device. It was discovered because of the conditions of the shelter's dry environment that preserved the wood from deteriorating away to dust. Unfortunately to

this day there are some people who still believe that this artifact is a banner stone rather than a weight for a spear-thrower.

### **Speculation and Tall Tales**

This remains a very real problem when theory and speculation are involved in the interpretive framework. But guess work will always be part of solving the problem of identifying unknown objects. It is indeed what is used to fill in the gaps. As researchers we must and I emphasize **MUST** always alert the reader or owner of the item, that supposition was used to resolve the puzzle and that all may not be true fact.

For example there is the oft-told tale about George Washington throwing a silver dollar across the Potomac River. This is probably a folk tale but presented as fact in many publications for years. The uninformed will believe this tale and perhaps the cherry tree story as well. Certainly the Potomac story could be possible. If he was at the headwaters, where the Potomac is less than a hundred yards wide, it could be possible.

The fault of faulty research is that erroneous information is perpetuated when anyone reads something in their research and doesn't thoroughly verify what they intend to use or publish. The best rule of thumb here is "verify, verify, verify!" Therefore one of the tools in our chest must be a healthy dose of skepticism.

### **Guessing and Reasoning**

Generalization is sometimes an easy remedy to gain information about an object. However this is more guesswork than fact finding. We generalize from a few examples. We simply make the guess that whatever has been true in a number of cases will probably be true in other cases of the same kind.

I must warn not to generalize before you have many facts. Most people find it difficult if not impossible to keep from doing so. Fortunately, it does not make much difference how freely we make generalizations, as long as we stand ready to change them when the facts prove them to be in error.

We all use deduction to qualify an item. Deductive reasoning is the mental process where an unobserved fact is inferred from relevant observation of other facts. We draw from other facts in order to infer or trace down facts hence we reach a conclusion.

Now inductive reasoning can be used as well, however this is more like generalization, and won't always produce all facts. Children often use inductive reasoning to figure things out. A child will gather information from the common and decide that things are factual until another observation changes their opinion. For instance a child will gather facts from his own pet cat. That his cat and the other cats have tails. Assuming that all cats have tails. One day he sees and reads about the Minx cat that has no tail, and his thinking changes about cat tails. Or he is scratched the first time he pets a cat and decides that all cats will scratch him, and makes the decision to never pet cats again. Inductive reasoning can be used by the researcher but will not always produce sound facts.

One of the tools often used is intuition. Webster's Encyclopedia Dictionaries describes it as "immediate and instinctive perception of a truth; direct understanding without reasoning." Many of us use instinctive reasoning without realizing it. It's another gap filler that holds truth. But intuition comes with knowledge. Knowledge comes from study; and study is integral to the structure of research.

### **Tools of the Trade**

Reference books are a great research tool. There are many reference books on just about any subject dealing with antiquity. Our libraries are full of them. Now that I mention it, libraries are research tools as well. So are Museums and Historic societies.

Personal experience and expertise are at the base of our framework. If it would not be for our specialists, the job of deciphering old object or events would be a monumental task. We certainly need our experts. This field is as vast as the things we try to explain. Just take a look around you. Most of us have fields of expertise. As a Historical Society we must look to our own personnel to get the best answers to what the public wants or needs to know.

I rely many times on charts called Chronological Typologies. These are the work of many individuals who have figured out an order and a time line of artifacts set by type and approximates date of origin. These types of charts if available really can take the work out identifying common objects such as buttons, beads, marbles, or artifacts etc.

There are also scientific tools. Carbon 14 dating has had a great impact on dating organic objects of antiquity. The electron microscope allows us to see a whole new world that can't be seen by the naked eye. Giving us a much closer look at material and manufacture.

The Shroud of Turin is a fine example of the use of scientific methods. Ongoing exhaustive studies have been done on this ancient textile. And to this day much mystery still shrouds the shroud. Sometimes we seek answers that are just not there.

So as we can see there are many tools in our research framework. They include but are not limited to- reference books, personal expertise, scientific tools such as radio carbon dating, charts, personal experience, field research, computer science, historical record, museums, libraries, are all part of our technique. As a Historical society we have many of these tools at hand. We must however be very open to new tools, and theories. Fakes, Reproductions and Fixes

Finally I need to say some things about fakes and reproductions. We are all aware of the fact that there is a very lucrative business in making reproductions. Some of the manufacturers are so good at their trade, that the best-trained eye has a difficult time separating the good from the bad. I have personally witnessed the making of some of the fakes that are out there and I am amazed at their abilities.

It is a common practice to observe an object to be a fake right from the beginning, and then through research and deduction we prove or verify that it is a reputable piece. Here again we have to be well educated in our field, to be able to at least recognize the possibilities of an object to be of questionable manufacture.

From my own experience it is a very delicate matter to attend to when it comes to informing someone of the fact, or at least the possibility, of their object being fraudulent. Many times I've had to let people know that what they have, as nice as it is, has the attributes of recent manufacture. You have to have a little finesse when it comes to this task. Sometimes these well-meaning folks will back up their object with untruths in order to convince you, the expert, that their piece is of very reputable authenticity. Leaving you with that delicate task of being steadfast in your opinion. You can always just say that it is just your opinion and leave it at that. I never argue with anyone who has their mind

set, that what they have is really authentic. I simply tell them the truth, as I know it.

We need also to recognize that there are many items being repaired. Here again the people doing this are often trying to sell the item as authentic. They are very good at fixing cracks, or chips, or even re-manufacturing missing pieces, to make something that has very little value into what looks like a very good piece. Buyer beware. If you think you're getting a valuable piece for a steal, look closer. A reputable antique dealer will tell you if there is a repair on an item when asked. But may not always tell you if you don't ask. I often carry a jeweler's loop so I can take close look at an item. A jeweler's loop is a very cheap yet effective tool for the researcher. Here again it may be up to the researcher to tell the owner that what they have is not what it seems to appear.

An Important Task

Remember that we are the ones who are doing a service in identifying, or researching for others. The nature of people is that they are not always coming to us just for an opinion, but for an affirmation, and for more information about the object in question.

We are in essence teachers as well as researchers.

Are there any questions?

Those in attendance at the April dinner and program were treated to a wonderfully informative presentation. Kim Mattern brought in objects to illustrate his talk, and helped identify artifacts from the group. According to society president David Goehring this was one of the best programs ever offered. Watch for future programs on this topic and by this presenter. You won't want to miss out.

