

## BCK – What is Historical Significance?

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EAdqGHNij5c>

You've now had a chance to study a few artifacts. One of our earlier questions was, why are artifacts important?

Artifacts can be clues to the past. People who study the past can look at artifacts such as clothing or tools or artwork and learn about the time period they are from. They also show us what we value because we save or preserve what we value.

The question about value or significance is really important when we are studying history and learning in museums. When we make collections, how do we choose what to keep and what to discard? What do collections show us about what we value from the past? Why do we value these objects today?

If we read about an event in a history book, does that mean it's significant? If we find an artifact in a museum, does that mean it's important?

In order to answer these questions, we need to talk about the idea of historical significance. Significant events or objects include those that resulted in great change over long periods of time for large numbers of people.

Today you studied a number of artifacts from the Museum of Healthcare. We're going to give you a challenge to think about how significant each of these objects is.

First, let's use this object as an example. Here's the portable dental treadle we saw earlier. If significance means resulting in great change for lots of people over time, is our portable dental treadle drill significant? Did it lead to meaningful changes for large numbers of people in their access to improved dental care and treatment? If so, what were they? Were other inventions inspired by this treadle drill?

Here's a checklist of basic questions to help in deciding if an object is significant:

1. How notable was it at the time it was created? Was it a big innovation or change? Did it cause people to change their attitudes and the ways they lived their lives?
2. How widespread was the impact? How many people were affected?
3. How lasting was the impact? Was the change short-term or long-term?

Also, historical objects and events may be significant on many levels: individual, regional, national, global.

Thinking about this mystery object, on what level do you think it is significant? Just to the patients or families that used it? Or to the whole town, country, or world?

Let's use three medical inventions and try to determine their relative historical significance.

**Stethoscope:** Before the stethoscope was invented in 1851, doctors would need to listen to the patient's heartbeats by placing an ear on their chests. This wasn't efficient. Today, we can see the stethoscope is widely used.

**Ether Mask:** Invented in 1889, this is a breathing system for delivering anesthetic. In developed countries, it was replaced in the 1950s by the anesthetic machine, which allows a physician greater control of the concentration and flow of anesthetics.

**Sputum Flask:** Throughout the 1800s, tuberculosis was the leading cause of death in the industrial world. Dr. Peter Detweiler, who himself was infected with TB, invented this flask in 1889. Tuberculosis patients had to carry a pocket flask and collect any sputum coughed up. When full, the contents would be burned in order to reduce the spread of the disease.

If we're thinking about significance, let's look at each of these objects starting with the stethoscope.

It was important when it was invented because it let doctors hear patients' breathing and heartbeats more clearly and make better diagnoses. For patients, it was a less intrusive and more respectful way to be examined. So, this tool was simple and inexpensive, and it was adopted by many doctors around the world and is still used globally today in many fields of healthcare.

The ether mask was an important innovation at its time too because patients could be sedated or put to sleep by breathing anesthetic vapor through a simple face covering. This method was kind of cheap and widely used in developed countries. It was used for about 60 years and then was replaced by the anesthetic machine, which was a better and more accurate way to offer doctors more control.

The sputum flask was invented in 1889. It was important during the tuberculosis epidemic in the 1800s and early 1900s. People who were infected with the disease could conveniently spit into their own little flask and get rid of it safely. The flasks were used in many developed countries. TB vaccines were then developed and became widely available in the mid-1900s. The knowledge on the importance of good hygiene improved, cases of TB declined, and sputum flasks were no longer needed or used.

The more you explore these issues, the more questions you'll probably have. Some questions will be challenging to answer, and many times these difficult questions will not have a single correct answer. That's okay. It's these questions that may prove to be the most significant.

These are the types of questions that you could ask about the artifacts you'll be studying and the ways they were used. Try to connect these investigations to technologies and practices in our own time. Have the results really made lives better? What about the effects on the environment?

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