

# Making



# Objects

# Speak

## **Wisdom Paper: Getting Objects to Speak to Each Other**

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I designed this tour to complement study in World history, early American history and food history courses as well as other courses that deal with the Atlantic world, the Age of Discovery, or the Consumer Revolution.

When I began to research the collections of the Metropolitan Museum of Art to create this tour, I first looked for pictures of food. I found several, including one that I thought would be ideal. This was still life by Luis Melendez, a Spanish painter of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. It depicted a pile of artichokes and tomatoes. Since artichokes are native to Europe and tomatoes to the Americas, this seemed to be the perfect image to introduce my audience to the role that food has played in world exploration.

As I made several return visits to the museum, however, and added not just paintings but also objects to my tour, I noticed that the Melendez painting was not speaking to any of my other food images or paintings. While other objects were beginning to tell an interwoven story—a chocolate pot, for instance, seemed to be in communication with a painting of sugar plantations in Brazil—the artichokes and tomatoes had no correspondence to other food related objects. What the chocolate pot and sugar plantation had in common which the tomato lacked was that both could speak to changing power relations that emerged in the Age of Empire as a result of exploration. Both had something to say about domination, exploitation, desire, and status. The slow introduction of the tomato to European cuisine had a profound impact on Italian cuisine, but there were never any tomato plantations, nor did the tomato come to represent high status in European society.

What I learned is that in order for a tour to work as I hope mine does, the objects must speak to each other, not simply to the viewer. The person who takes the tour is then introduced to what was previously an unseen web of connections binding objects and paintings from different galleries as well as different times and places. The museum then is revealed as a site in which conversation among the seemingly silent objects is ongoing, a place alive with the construction of cultural value and historical narrative, not a mausoleum for oddities like a silver Nef or a bit of decorative pottery lie gathering dust.

In the course of writing this tour, one of my voices was silenced when the above-mentioned painting of a Brazilian landscape was removed from the gallery where I had found it and replaced with another painting that was no use to me. As I go over the tour myself, I admit that I still hear it whispering in the background, ever a part of the conversation among objects that I happened to overhear while writing this tour.