Object Histories

Look carefully at the object pictured below and at its description provided in the museum label. Answer the following questions about the object's history.

Museum Label
Title: Fragmentary mudbrick preserving imprint of a worker's left hand
Material: Mudbrick
Date: Middle–Late Parthian period (141 BCE–226 CE)
Findspot: Seleucia on the Tigris, Iraq. U-M excavations, 1927–1932, 1936–1937
Object number: KM 33670

Stone was scarce in Mesopotamia, but the mud and straw needed to make bricks were abundant. Bricks were used to build everything from simple houses to royal palaces and massive temples. It was believed that the essence of a building resided in its bricks.

In ceremonial building activities, such as the making of the first brick for a temple, it was common for a Mesopotamian king to present himself as a humble brick-maker, carrying a basket filled with earth on his head. In reality, thousands of laborers did the work. They pressed mud and straw into wooden frames to form the bricks, stamped them with the king's name, and monitored them as they dried in the sun or were fired in kilns.

Questions

1. What does the label tell you about what the object was used for, and what it was made to do?

2. Who do you think made something like this? Someone at home for themselves? A highly skilled artisan who made only a few at a time? A team of people in a workshop who made a lot of them? None of the above?

3. Do you think the maker or makers of this object were also the ones who used it? Or is it more likely that it was used by a different person? Is it too hard to tell? What evidence do you see to support your opinion?

4. Does the label tell you anything about how the object came to be in a museum? Was the object excavated? Was it donated by a collector?

5. Have you ever visited a museum — the Kelsey or another museum — or seen one in a movie or on TV? Think about how objects like this one are used in a museum setting. Does it differ from its original use? How?

6. If you were a museum professional (like an educator or curator), how do you think you might use this object?