

Using the back cover image

The moustache cup

Matthew Sossick

The moustache cup I purchased on ebay is one of the most popular artefacts I use with students in a good game of 'guess the object'. It has a wonderful quality of being at the same time familiar yet strange. Despite telling the students not to start with the question of 'what is it' so that they can carry out a source investigation, they inevitably do. However, they are often stumped for an explanation – which is where the fun begins. The key feature of the mug is the semi-circular bar which runs across a top portion of the cup with a characteristic hole near the rim. The students tend to come up with a range of explanations for the presence of the bar which include: a place to rest a tea spoon; some kind of strainer for tea leaves (presumably ones not very well chopped up given the size of the hole); and a way to stop the tea burning the lip or ruining a lady's make-up.

I always tell students that it is fine as a starting-point to begin with a weird and wonderful object in a classroom which is completely out of context. Children can have fun hypothesising and justifying their decisions which are all good higher-order thinking skills. However, to improve their historical understanding when they become stumped for ideas, some related sources can be dropped in so that children can make links between the information they have been given. For instance, using the source below you could ask pupils to spot the things in the picture that the men have in common. If they can identify the moustaches then they have a clue about the cup. A more pointed question might be 'why might these men find this cup useful?'

If the pupils work out that it was there to cover up the moustache you can then ask them to think about why would you need to protect your moustache in the first place. Good teaching is all about extending thinking with carefully considered questions. Ask the pupils if men who have moustaches today need to protect them using moustache cups. The answer is generally no, which could lead on to a discussion about how in Victorian times moustaches were very popular and men went to a lot of trouble to have fashionable moustaches which had good shape and colour as Image 2 shows. The colour was achieved using dye and the shape was achieved using wax.

The British army even made it compulsory to have a moustache from 1860–1915 as it believed this gave the men more authority (there was a revolt in the army against this regulation in 1913).

Armed with this information the children can do some problem solving. What is the link between the fashion, the grooming products and the moustache cup? The teacher can then talk about how fashions are often cyclical and with the advent of Movember there are a whole range of new moustache waxes currently on sale.

The moustache cup can find its place in the curriculum in the post-1066 period if a class is looking at the Victorians and/or Edwardians. It has links to fashion and consumption of food and

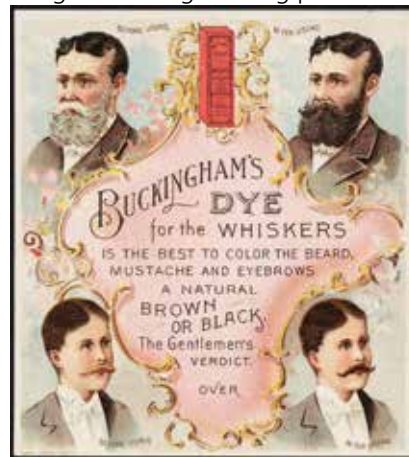
Image 1: British army officers.



drink. The fashion for high tea and decorative tea sets as a form of entertainment and social status helps explain the proliferation of these objects as much as their practical use. Teachers can use the object to branch off into looking at trade, empire and mass consumption of products such as tea and sugar. The humble tea-cup can tell us so much.

Matthew Sossick is Head of Primary ITE at the University of Roehampton and a member of the *Primary History* Editorial Board.

Image 2: Male grooming products.





The Haviland mustache cup
© The Mary Baker Eddy Library