

## Group Project

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### **Attributed to William Howard**

### **Writing Desk, 1870**

Introduction -      Connie

\*To be handed in separately

Key Idea 1 -      Allie

This desk was made during the post-Civil War time period in America when slavery was a part of many people's lives. For hundreds of years in America, people were taken from their homes (usually in Africa) and they were enslaved – meaning they were forced to do very hard jobs, all day every day, without being paid. Which is a really terrible thing, right? A lot of slaves in the southern states worked on what are called plantations which are like big farms where lots of different plants were grown and harvested for things like tobacco, sugar, cotton, and much more.

The Civil War was fought between the Southern and Northern states in America. The Southern states didn't want to be part of the United States anymore and decided to make their own country. They were worried about losing state power and certain rights, like the right to own slaves. But the northern states wanted to stay one country; when the South surrendered and the war ended, President Abraham Lincoln abolished (which means he 'got rid of') slavery.

This desk was created by a man named William Howard, a former enslaved person living on the Kirkwood cotton plantation in Mississippi. He made it in 1870, so five years after the Civil War ended – and thus five years into his life as a free American. He crafted this for his own home on the plantation, where he stayed on after the war ended.

Key Idea 2 - Allie

The desk was crafted in a high-style neoclassical for which has a very traditional look to it and is a style you would see in many people's homes – especially upper class or wealthy families. Furniture in this neoclassical style would traditionally be made out of mahogany, a really expensive wood that would have been pretty hard to get a hold of.

But William Howard made this desk out of 'make-do' materials that he would have had access to – pine wood from the woods at the plantation, Bull Durham tobacco boxes, and cotton shipping crates. So it creates a really cool contrast between the fancy style of the desk and the humble materials it is built from.

Question 1 - Barb

As Allie said, Mr. Howard did not have access to expensive or fine woods. He had to use whatever he could find on the plantation or on his farm.

How do you think the artist felt when he finished building this desk?

What do you see that makes you think that?

I wish we could see inside this desk. The desk must open to create a writing surface. How do you think this desk opens?

What might be inside?

We are lucky that we have a picture of the inside. How is this different from what we imagined?

Key Idea 3 - Allie

On the front of the writing desk, William Howard carved over 70 tools that he used throughout his life – tools you would use to work, to fight, to cook, and to live. While at first glance these seem like straightforward objects, they are deeply personal symbols of his life. They were all tools he worked with when he was enslaved and would have used very frequently, since labor would have been mostly all that you were even allowed to do. As a newly freed man, he chose to carve representations of work onto one of the first pieces of furniture he would have been able to carve for himself for his own home. He quite literally put his life into his work.

Question 2 - Barb

Look carefully at this desk. Describe the objects or details that you see.

What are some of the objects you recognize?

Some objects we may not recognize. What objects do you wonder about?

What might that object be used for?

Question 3 - Barb

I would like you to share your answer to the next question with a friend near you. If you could decorate a desk with any objects, what objects would you pick to show who you are and to tell your story? I'll give you a few moments to share your ideas with each other.

Who would like to share your ideas with the rest of us?

If you could decorate a piece of furniture with your own personal objects, you would be telling your own story in a visual way, differently from writing it down.

Now Connie will continue with our art stories today.

Transition - to Mill Pond in Minneapolis - Connie

\*To be handed in separately

