What was on Lady Bird’s plate?

**Parent Guide**

*Read the “Directions” sheet for step-by-step instructions.*

**SUMMARY**

In this activity, children will examine pictures of Lady Bird Johnson’s White House dishes and compare them to their dishes at home.

**WHY**

By looking at historical artifacts and comparing them to everyday material culture, children will develop detailed observation skills and practice thinking critically about the meanings and stories behind objects in their lives.

**TIME**

- 15 minutes

**CHALLENGE WORDS**

- **beautification**: to fight against decay and ugliness and improve the appearance of a place or thing
- **china**: (in this context) plates, cups, and other kinds of tableware made of a delicate material called “porcelain”
- **environment**: the conditions that surround someone or something; for people, this includes the weather, earth, plants, animals, and more

**GET READY**

- Read *Miss Lady Bird’s Wildflowers* together. *Miss Lady Bird’s Wildflowers* is a biography of Claudia “Lady Bird” Johnson, wife of President Lyndon Baines Johnson. For tips on reading this book together, check out the *Guided Reading Activity* ([http://americanhistory.si.edu/ourstory/pdf/firstlady/firstlady_reading.pdf](http://americanhistory.si.edu/ourstory/pdf/firstlady/firstlady_reading.pdf)).
- Read the *Step Back in Time* sheet.

**YOU NEED**

- Directions sheet *(attached)*
- Step Back in Time sheets *(attached)*
- Images of the Johnson china *(attached)*
- *Miss Lady Bird’s Wildflowers* book *(optional)*
- Paper plates and craft materials *(optional)*

More information at [http://americanhistory.si.edu/ourstory/activities/firstlady/](http://americanhistory.si.edu/ourstory/activities/firstlady/)
Part of a woman’s traditional role in America has been to care for her family and help the needy in her community. Similarly, a wife of a U.S. president (called “the first lady”) often supports charities and other social causes. Recent first ladies have supported and brought attention to literacy, health care, prevention of drug abuse, volunteer work, and taking care of historic places. Their examples have encouraged women to take action at many levels, and have provided role models for women and girls.

Claudia “Lady Bird” Johnson, the wife of President Lyndon Baines Johnson, was first lady from 1963 to 1969. She took her job as first lady seriously. She carefully chose and announced the project she would work on while her husband was president. In a 1994 interview, she told the Washington Post, “Once you are [first lady] and you want to serve whatever your husband’s efforts are on behalf of the country, you choose those which make your heart sing.”
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**Background Information, page 2 of 2**

For more information, visit the National Museum of American History Web site [http://americanhistory.si.edu/ourstory/activities/firstlady/](http://americanhistory.si.edu/ourstory/activities/firstlady/).

Because Lady Bird Johnson loved nature and the environment, she turned her interest into projects to support her husband’s efforts to improve living conditions for all Americans. She called it **beautification**. Lady Bird Johnson worked hard to get Congress to pass laws that protected the **environment**. She encouraged Americans to plant gardens and clean up neighborhoods and parks.

After leaving the White House, she continued to work on **beautification** and helped to start the National Wildflower Center, now called the **Lady Bird Johnson Wildflower Center** ([www.wildflower.org/](http://www.wildflower.org/)).

For more information on Lady Bird Johnson and other first ladies, visit the online exhibition **The First Ladies at the Smithsonian** ([http://americanhistory.si.edu/firstladies/](http://americanhistory.si.edu/firstladies/)).

**beautification**: to fight against ugliness and improve the looks of a place or thing

**environment**: the conditions that surround someone or something; for people, this includes the weather, earth, air, water, plants, animals, and more

Illustrations from *Miss Lady Bird’s Wildflowers* used by permission of HarperCollins Publishers.
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For adults and kids to follow together.

1. Read through the Step Back in Time sheets or Miss Lady Bird’s Wildflowers. What was one of Lady Bird Johnson’s main projects as first lady?

2. Take a close look at the pictures of the china Lady Bird Johnson had made for the White House. Use the questions on the ThinkAbout sheets to talk about the china.

3. Design your own china for the White House or for your own home.

   - What issues are you interested in?
   - How would you represent them on a plate? Think about how those pictures would make someone using the plate feel.
   - Would you want the picture to be in the center of the plate or along the edges?

   **Tip** For more fun, have children create the design using paper plates and craft materials.

For more activities and information about Miss Lady Bird’s Wildflowers and Lady Bird Johnson, visit (http://americanhistory.si.edu/ourstory/activities/firstlady/).
Talk About Lady Bird’s Dishes

- What pictures do you see on the china? How do the pictures connect to the story of Lady Bird Johnson?
  - Do you see an eagle? Eagles sometimes represent the United States of America or the president.
  - Do you see any symbols? What do those symbols stand for?

- Look at the colors on the plates. Do they make you think of a feeling or remind you of something else?

- Take one picture and have a friend or family member close his eyes. Now try to describe everything about the plate, so he or she can imagine what the plate looks like. After you’re done describing, have your friend look at the picture and compare what he imagined to what is in the picture. Were there any details you missed?

- Where are the pictures on the plates? Think about how the plates would be used—if you put food on the china, could you see all of the pictures?

- Lady Bird Johnson’s beautification program was based on the idea that nature can be beautiful and can make people feel happy. If you were a guest at the White House and saw these plates, how would they make you feel? What if you had to choose between sitting at a place set with plain china or one with Lady Bird’s decorated china?

- One of Lady Bird Johnson’s other projects was making sure children had good preschools. How might she have pictured that project on White House china?

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**ThinkAbout, page 2 of 2**

**Talk About Your Dishes**

- Compare these dishes to the dishes in your home.
  - Do your dishes have pictures on them?
  - Lady Bird Johnson had these plates designed by Tiffany and Company. What company made your dishes at home?
  - If someone came to your house for dinner and looked carefully at your plates, what would your plates tell someone about you and your family?

- When Lady Bird Johnson had these dishes made, she had a special set sent to the Smithsonian Institution. Where do you keep your dishes? Where would you keep them if you wanted to keep them extra safe?

- Does your family have a set of dishes for special times? If so, where did the dishes come from? Why did your family pick those dishes?

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Images of the Johnson China, page 1 of 2

Plates from the Johnson state china, 1968

Division of Politics and Reform, National Museum of American History

More information at http://americanhistory.si.edu/ourstory/activities/firstlady/
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*Images of the Johnson China, page 1 of 2*

**Bowl from the Johnson state china, 1968**

Division of Politics and Reform, National Museum of American History

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**Teacher Guide, page 1 of 1**

**Read the “Directions” and “Parent Guide” sheets for step-by-step instructions.**

**OBJECTIVES**

The students will be better able to:

- Analyze everyday and historical objects.
- Describe Lady Bird Johnson and her beautification project.

**STUDENT PERFORMANCE CRITERIA**

- Makes detailed observations from the photographs.
- Accurately compares and contrasts everyday and historical objects.

**STANDARDS**

- **NCHS History Standards**
  - K-4 Historical Thinking Standards
    - 4B. Obtain historical data.
  - K-4 Historical Content Standards
    - 4C. The student understands historic figures who have exemplified values and principles of American democracy.

**21st-Century Skills**

- **Learning and Innovation Skills**
  - Creativity and Innovation

- **Information, Media, and Technology Skills**
  - Media Literacy

More information at [http://americanhistory.si.edu/ourstory/activities/firstlady/](http://americanhistory.si.edu/ourstory/activities/firstlady/)