

Primary Source Analysis — Artworks: Suggestions for Teachers

Primary sources are firsthand evidence that provide glimpses into history. The Collections Search database (<https://history.house.gov/Collection/>) contains works of art and historical artifacts related to the U.S. House of Representatives. By analyzing these materials, students can better understand historical events, American culture, and the House itself. Below are some suggestions to help facilitate analysis and discussion of objects as primary sources. While these suggestions will guide you through analyzing artworks in our Collections Search, we invite you to use this graphic organizer with any primary source that your class is examining.

- 1. Select an artwork and review the catalogue record before introducing it to your students.** Collection Search provides detailed information about each artwork, and links to further information about the subject and the historical context. The detailed description and links to related material will help you get started.
- 2. Save a copy of the image.** Expand the image in the Collection Search record, and save by right-clicking on the image. This makes it easy to project the image on a screen for the whole class to view together or print copies for individuals or groups.
- 3. Provide students with our Primary Source Analysis graphic organizer.** There are three different organizers for different types of objects in the Collections Search database: artworks, artifacts, and photographs. The graphic organizer will guide students as they analyze the object. The worksheet can be used as a classroom activity, homework, a supplement to student notes, or a formal or informal assessment.
- 4. Use the graphic organizer to model the process for analyzing primary sources.** Before asking students to analyze an artwork individually or in small groups, demonstrate the process for the entire class. Encourage questions about artworks as primary sources, analysis, and the worksheet itself.
- 5. Allow students to analyze artworks in small groups or individually.** Allow students to work through the process on their own. If possible, encourage them to annotate a printed image, noting questions, comments, unfamiliar attributes, etc.
- 6. Facilitate a class discussion.** After completing their graphic organizers, students should share their analyses with the class. As the leader of this discussion, you should highlight for your students the artwork's connections to the historical era or unit being studied.

Primary Source Analysis — Artworks

Step 1: Identify

Title

Artist/Maker, Date

Type of Artwork (circle all that apply)

Painting • Sculpture • Print • Portrait
Landscape • Cartoon • Other

Describe what you see in this artwork; observe as many details as you can.

Step 2: Understand

What is this artwork about? Think about how the details you've observed might help you piece together the message of the work.

How did you come to your conclusion about the artwork's message?

What questions does the artwork raise for you?

Step 3: Connect

What does this artwork tell us about the time period and the artist?

How is this artwork related to U.S. History?

Primary Source Analysis — Artworks: Completed Example

Step 1: Identify

Title

Entrance Into Monterey

Artist/Maker, Date

Albert Bierstadt, 1876

Type of Artwork (circle all that apply)

Painting • Sculpture • Print • Portrait
Landscape • Cartoon • Other

Describe what you see in this artwork; observe as many details as you can.

In the foreground, horses, sheep, and cows are scattered across a grassy area, with people watching over them. Beyond them, a larger group of people gather under a tree for what appears to be a religious service: there is an altar with a cross behind it as well as several flags, three with crosses and one with a coat of arms. A man who looks like a priest stands with his back to the group, with his arms raised, facing a smaller cross. To the left, a man rings a bell suspended from a tree. The background has a body of water with a large ship in it, with hills on the opposite shore. The sun is shining through a haze in the sky.

Step 2: Understand

What is this artwork about? Think about how the details you've observed might help you piece together the message of the work.

The title tells us this is Monterey Bay in California. It looks like Spanish colonists are holding the mass. The people in the foreground look like they may be Native Americans. The painting shows a separation between the new settlers and native people in a scenic landscape. The land looks attractive and grassy.

How did you come to your conclusion about the artwork's message?

The title gives us some information about the location. The type of ship, the red and yellow coat of arms and the Catholic-seeming service (lots of crosses, kneeling crowd) imply that the large group is Spanish. There are no buildings (church is outside!), so they have just arrived. This is far in the past. The people in the foreground appear to be Native American – signified by some stereotypical objects, like baskets and arrows.

What questions does the artwork raise for you?

What is the relationship between the Native Americans attending their herd and the Spaniards? Why did the artist choose to show Spanish settlers in California?

Step 3: Connect

What does this artwork tell us about the time period and the artist?

The artist was known for his landscapes of the American West. This painting was made specifically for the Capitol, so I think adding people to the scene and making a story out of the California landscape was something he was asked to do to suit the setting of the painting. Conflicts with Native American people were an important part of the westward expansion of America, so that is an important idea to add to the scene, even though the scene is peaceful.

How is this artwork related to U.S. History?

Manifest Destiny—the idea that the United States was meant to take over all of North America—had been a popular idea for some time by the 1870s, and this was used to illustrate the early days of California, which had only recently become a state. The settlement of California and the West was happening rapidly at this time, so including an image from the past of the state in the U.S. Capitol helped connect it to eastern America.