

How to Read an Artwork as a Primary Source

Each detail represents a decision the artist made, so everything is potentially important. Make a long list of observations.

Remember: this is not the time to “figure out” what’s going on – just look. You are collecting evidence to use later.

STEP ONE: OBSERVE

Look closely.

- Spend 1 to 3 minutes just looking. Stay silent and focused.
- Pay close attention to your first impressions and your initial reactions to the piece. Where does your eye go first? How does the artwork make you feel?
- Focus *only* on the artwork itself. Do not consider any available background information—including artist, title and date—at this stage.

Observation Example:



- An African-American woman and girl are seated in a dim room with cracked brick walls and a single door with a window. Their clothing is simple but not ripped or torn.
- The woman’s head is covered and she wears an apron. She has bent shoulders and wrinkles. She looks down, with eyes closed and hands clasped.
- The girl has uncovered hair and rounded cheeks. She sits very close to the older woman. She looks down and points to a large book open in her lap.

STEP TWO: INTERPRET

Allow observation to lead to interpretation.

- Use your observations as evidence to build your interpretation of what is going on in the artwork. If observations are what you see, interpretations are what you think based on what you see.
- Reconsider your first impression of the work. How did the artist point out areas of importance? What factors contribute to the mood? You don’t need to be an expert in the elements and principles of art to notice that an artist has made something important by shining a light on it or created a sad picture by using lots of grey and dark blue. Trust your instincts.

Remember: interpretations are not necessarily right or wrong, and not everyone will interpret an artwork in the same way. An excellent interpretation is one that is supported by the evidence found in observations. Think deeply about the meaning of the artwork. Artists use images to represent big ideas such as freedom, tolerance, or love. What could the artist be trying to say in the images you see?

Interpretation Example:



- Only the basic needs of clothing and shelter are met. Their clothing, such as the apron, is appropriate for manual labor. Because the chairs are so close to the door, it looks like the entire room is very small.
- The difference in ages and closeness implies that they might be a grandmother and a granddaughter.
- The grandmother's clasped hands make her look like she is praying, so the book is probably the Bible.

STEP THREE: CONNECT

Relate the artwork to your own experience and knowledge.

- Consider your observations and interpretations. Draw from your own experience and knowledge to gain more understanding.
- Can you identify the setting? The subject matter? Are there any clues that could tell you why the work was created, or for whom was it created? Remember to defend these claims using observations.
- There may be some questions you have that are not answered by the artwork itself. What are these questions? Where could you find the answers?
- Consider any background information you have about the artwork, including information such as title, artist, and date. How does this information fit with your interpretation of the artwork at this stage? What ideas can you enrich or discard?

Remember: attitudes change throughout history. Use your knowledge of the time period when the artwork was created to consider how people might have understood it differently then. For example, a smoke stack can look like pollution to a modern viewer but probably seemed like progress to someone living during the Industrial Revolution.

Pay close attention to anything that conflicts with your knowledge of history. These can be valuable clues to the point of view of the artist and the time period.

Details about this sample artwork that would be displayed on a gallery label:

artist: Thomas Waterman Wood

title: *Sunday Morning*

execution date: about 1877

medium: oil on paperboard mounted on canvas

dimensions: 14 x 10 1/8 in.

credit line: Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of Mrs. Francis P. Garvan

Connections Example:



- Painted around 1877, after the Civil War and the abolition of slavery. The book is important in this context because enslaved people were not allowed to learn how to read. Literacy for freedmen and women, and the opportunities it could provide, was an important result of abolition.
- The artist is Northern. Perhaps this scene was reassuring for supporters of abolition? It demonstrates that the girl may have more opportunities in life than her grandmother.
- The title, *Sunday Morning*, supports the theory that the girl is reading the Bible
- The house is small and in poor condition, but is solid. The light shining through may imply hope for the future.

STEP FOUR: CONCLUDE

Draw conclusions and formulate big questions for further investigation.

- Based on the information and ideas you have gathered, are there interpretations you need to change or discard? What is the main idea of the artwork?
- The artwork may raise big questions for you, some that could have many complex answers. What are some answers you can think of? Weigh different options. It may be helpful to write about this process or discuss it with a classmate.
- What are the implications of our discoveries/questions? Where can we go to learn more?

Conclusion Example:



A main idea for this artwork could be as follows:

A simple scene of a family reading the Bible has significance because of the importance of literacy to freedom and progress after the abolition of slavery.

Big Questions:

- What opportunities would the young girl have had in this time period?
- What significance did freed African Americans see in the messages of the Bible?