



ART HISTORY: BUILDING CONTEXT AROUND A WORK OF ART

The questions in this chart will help students develop a full picture of the history of the artwork they are studying. It can also be a place to capture questions that emerge during their research, which might be explored through other primary sources or further investigation. A set of recommended and accessible resources for conducting research is at the end of this document. To learn more about Art + History, visit artic.edu/artplushistory.

Artist's Name: _____

Title and Date of Artwork: _____

1. FIND OUT MORE ABOUT THE ARTIST

Research Questions		
A. Biographical	Notes	Source(s)
When and where was the artist born? When and where did the artist die? Where did the artist live, especially while making major works? Other general biographical notes		
B. Influences/Interests	Notes	Source(s)
What were the artist's major interests or subjects? What/who were the artist's major aesthetic or intellectual influences?		

2. FIND OUT MORE ABOUT THE ARTWORK

Research Questions		
A. Description of the Work	Notes	Source(s)
In what medium was the work made/ what materials were used?		
What is the size of the work?		
What is the style of the work?		
What is the subject matter of the work?		

Research Questions, cont.		
B. History of the Work's Creation	Notes	Source(s)
When and where was the work created? Under what circumstances was the work created, if known? Was it created for a particular person or audience? Was the work exhibited? If so, where and when? What is the relationship of the work to the artist's body of work?		

3. FIND OUT MORE ABOUT THE TIME PERIOD

Research Questions		
A. Periodization of the Work	Notes	Source(s)
When was the artwork created? Is this a period of time known as an “epoch” or “era”—i.e., the Gilded Age, the Civil Rights Movement, the Great Migration, the Enlightenment, etc.?		
B. Historical Context and Content	Notes	Source(s)
What major events, problems, movements, and/or ideas mark this period of time or define our understanding of this historical moment? Does this artwork comment directly on any event, problem, movement, and/or idea of any historical period? If so, which historical moment, and how do you know?		

Research Questions, cont.		
B. Historical Context and Content	Notes	Source(s)
Does this artwork indirectly reflect any of the significant events, problems, movements, and/or ideas of the historical period in which it was created? How do you know? What else do you need/want to know about the time period in order to better explain the significance of this artwork?		

SUGGESTED SOURCE LIST

When beginning to contextualize any source, including a work of art, it is best to begin at the outermost layer of sources. Good reference (or tertiary) sources can quickly orient you to the main facts and help you begin to build a foundation for more in-depth research. The best sources to answer most of these questions will be:

- the “tombstone” information on the label next to a work in the Art Institute galleries
- the Art Institute’s webpage for the artwork
- art historical and/or general encyclopedias and biographical dictionaries
- timelines of history and art history
- good-quality college history textbooks

TIMELINES (FREE)

African American History Timeline (BlackPast.org): <http://www.blackpast.org/african-american-history-timeline>

Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History (Metropolitan Museum of Art): <http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/>

History by Era: <http://www.gilderlehrman.org/history-by-era>

Technology in America Timeline (PBS): <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/telephone-technology-timeline/>

ENCYCLOPEDIAS AND DICTIONARIES

Some of these may only be available by subscription; check with your school, community, or local librarian to help you gain access.

askART

Provides biographical and professional data on over 120,000 American artists from the early 16th century through the present.

Encyclopedia Britannica

Provides access to more than 72,000 articles from the print version of the encyclopedia, as well as access to more than 75,000 definitions.

Funk & Wagnall’s

General encyclopedia written at the popular level. Includes full-text articles and biographies.

Oxford Art Online

Provides access to *The Grove Dictionary of Art*, *The Oxford Companion to Western Art*, *Oxford’s Encyclopedia of Aesthetics*, *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Art Terms*, and *The Benezit Dictionary of Artists*. These can all be searched simultaneously or separately.

Oxford English Dictionary

Provides detailed etymologies—and historical usages—for nearly every word in the English language.

Oxford Music Online

Provides access to *Grove Music Online*, *The Oxford Dictionary of Music*, and *The Oxford Companion to Music*.

Other Resources

For free options, Wikipedia can be useful, but approach with caution (check citations, etc.) and use sparingly. The Library of Congress provides a reliable and useful set of informational websites here: <https://www.loc.gov/teachers/>. Many older biographical dictionaries and historical encyclopedias have been made fully available on **GoogleBooks** (books.google.com)—so don’t forget to try that as well, though this is not always the easiest tool to use. **FindAGrave.com** is a reliable source for death and birth dates and sometimes has other references and information of relevance.