

Tips for Historical Interpretation of Visual Material

Dr. Diane Miliotes, past Research Curator of the Hood Museum of Art at Dartmouth College, offers the following general areas for consideration and some basic questions to ask when studying historical visual material.

Subject

What is the subject of the work of art?

- Does the title or any caption give you clues?
- Does knowing the artist or date give you any additional insight?

Medium

What is the medium of the work, and who would have been likely to see it?

- Is it a work of fine art (an oil painting or sculpture to be seen in a private setting or by a limited audience?)
- Is it a public work such as an illustration that circulated in the press as a political commentary, or a poster that would have had a propagandistic purpose?
- Or is it a large-scale public work like a mural, memorial or sculpture?

Details

What details of the image contribute to your understanding of its meaning and point of view?

- Symbols
- Clothing and other attributes
- Style
- Composition (how separate elements are arranged into a coherent whole)
- Relationships between figures

Purpose

What is the image's overall purpose, and what does it tell the viewer? What position or values does it express, and how does it do it?

See also the related document "Tips for Evaluating Historical Documents" on the Society's Web site (<http://www.nhhistory.org/edu/support/nhsourcesindex.htm>). The document is also available on the Society's CD-ROM.