

## How to do an Image Analysis

An image is worth a thousand words. Students who study a great historical moment or the countless details of earlier everyday life often find images as invaluable sources: acting as windows into the past and today students study the content and the meaning of visual images to better understand a particular topic, time, or event. The first step in using an image as a historical source is to identify the subject and content of the image, soon followed by reviewing contextual information that may not be in the image. For example, who the producer the image, when it was made and who was intended to view it are all important elements, often not referenced in the image itself, which can radically change our interpretation. Together, the image and the context provide us with the opportunity to better understand history.

### Images as part of History

Most history textbooks and many academic histories use images to illustrate the history that they tell. However, when we are given these books in our classes, we rarely spend time exploring the images in them, focusing our attention instead on the written content. We do so because of the way that images are presented in many historical texts and also because of the way we are trained to view images—as supplemental to written history rather than sources of history themselves.

### The Accessibility of the Image

Using images to teach history often seems more accessible to students than the written record. The learners who arrive in my classroom are not only immersed in technology, but also in visual ways of learning. They appreciate the immediacy of the image, which often conveys information more quickly than a primary document written in unfamiliar, or even a foreign, language. This immediacy also works well in discussion sections, where the shared experience of viewing a picture can provide a focus for lively group discussion. Students are often already sophisticated readers of visual media and, with guidance and support, many enjoy the process of viewing and analyzing historical representations.

To strengthen your skills in analyzing images and any visual media, you should be aware of the composition of the image, its historical context, and theoretical issues related to representation. Many questions about the form of the image have been explored most thoroughly in the history of art. In terms of historical context, students are encouraged not only to pay close attention to an image's production and circulation, but also to the responses of the image's audience. In most cases, this information cannot be learned from the image itself, but only from the description the instructor has written to accompany the image.

### Some Steps for Success:

1. View the images and jot down your initial response to each.
2. Read the description paragraph and question.
3. Circle and identify the keys Persons and Objects in the image.
4. Respond to the Question and include the key Persons and Objects in the response.
5. You should be able to complete this assignment in no more than **thirty** minutes.
6. **Again remember, the great thing about history is that there is no one right answer. But there certainly are better answers than others and those that are accurate, specific and strive to tell me “why” you interpreted an image in a particular way: especially if you incorporate persons and objects you identified in step 3. Those responses that are inaccurate, vague, repetitive in their information and unable to explain their interpretation will receive the score they have earned.**

The following rubric describes levels of competence in completing an identification item on a history exam or homework assignment.

Levels correspond roughly to letter grades (4 = A, 1 = F) and appropriate points that will be awarded for each.

Level	Criteria
4	All relevant components of the question are clearly and fully addressed. The response demonstrates detailed knowledge of the most important features of the image, as well as relation of image to larger historical periods, trends, and concepts. Response has no grammatical or punctual errors and is entirely written by the student.
3	Most relevant components of the question are adequately addressed. The response demonstrates general knowledge of the image, as well as some relation of the image to larger historical periods, trends, and concepts.
2	Most relevant components of the question are adequately addressed, with no more than one significant element missing. The response demonstrates some knowledge of the image. Relation of image to larger historical periods, trends, and concepts vague or unclear.
1	Several relevant components of the question response are missing or incorrect. The response does not distinguish the image from other image. Relation of image to larger historical periods, trends, and concepts missing or incorrect. Student quotes other sources instead of independently writing the information. Information is plagiarized.

# The United States & the 19<sup>th</sup> Century (1800's)

## History through Image Interpretation

In the following pages are several images from American History in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. **Select one section** and respond to the question prompts posed. Each question response should be 4 to 6 sentences long.

### Section 1: American Democracy and Mass Mobilization

A) In the early 1800's, the United States would be not only a republic – where elected representatives acted on behalf of the people – but also become the world's 1<sup>st</sup> democracy, where the common people voted. Political parties grew and politicians campaigned across the nation hoping to win over a large electorate. In painting of a frontier town below, a politician (in white) is “stump speaking” – or giving a short speech from a platform (often a tree stump) to better be heard. Judging from their appearance and expression, are the townsfolk agreeing, skeptical, pondering or just bored with what the politician has to say? Some Americans feared democracy would lead to chaos and violence yet what seems to be the atmosphere of this gathering?



B) In this new democratic age, Americans prized the right to elect their government and on election day participated en masse. Voting was not a quiet private event but a community affair, noisy, chaotic, with a holiday-like spirit. Candidates (in blue with the top hat) were often present at polling places making one last-ditch attempt to convince voters of their worthiness and votes were given orally and in public. Yet despite being the most democratic of nations, many in the United States did not have the right to vote. In the painting below, what activities besides voting are Americans doing and should they have right to vote? Also, what half of the American population appears absent entirely?



C) During the early Republic, state and local militias were the first and only means of defense for Americans. Many Americans supported this, believing the people had the right and ability to best arm and defend themselves and were unlikely to prove oppressive or expensive like a professional military. Yet in the War of 1812, American militias often performed poorly against the experienced British Army. Depicted below is an American militia muster or training exercise. Do the militia members seem disciplined and interested in training? Do the militia maneuvers seem well-organized (far right, green fields) and what message did the artist hope to achieve?



## Section 2: The American West and Settlement

A) With the Louisiana Purchase, the United States acquired vast western territories all the way to the Rocky Mountains (background). In the early 1800's American fur trappers or Mountain men explored and hunted across the region and held an annual trade fair or rendezvous to sell their furs and hides and replenish their supplies. Always a festive event with horse racing and games, the rendezvous attracted not only Mountain men but also American Indian tribes. Based on paintings, whom made up the majority of rendezvous participants and what might have been reasons for American Indians attend to the rendezvous?



B) Americans had migrated westward for generations but by the 1800's millions would head westward in search of opportunity and land. The painting *The First Harvest in the Wilderness* celebrates this American settlement showing a small farm or homestead and in the midst of a grand natural world in which humanity plays only a small part. Find and identify the two human figures in the painting (near the wheatfield and cabin). What do they appear to be doing? Did the painter intend any symbolism with where the sunlight is shining?



C) In the early 1800's a new political philosophy supported the westward movement of American settlers known as Manifest Destiny. In the words of John O'Sullivan – an American newspaper writer at the time – Manifest Destiny is the belief the United States is a “nation of progress, of individual freedom... freedom of conscience, freedom of person, freedom of trade and business pursuits, universality of freedom and equality” and had a mission to “carry the glad tidings of peace and good will where myriads [the American Indians in the West] now endure an existence scarcely more enviable than that of beasts of the field.” Like O'Sullivan, many believed America's arrival would bring prosperity to all through Civilization (represented by the floating lady in white). What characters can you spot in the painting? What is Lady Civilization holding in her hands and whom or what is depicted in the far left and on far right of the painting?



## Section 3: And Everything Nice...What Early American Women Were Made Of

A) Today, the study of early American women focuses on expected social duties and the absence of voting rights. Such a narrow viewpoint often neglects the important social influence and power American women regularly exercised in the 1800's. At this evening dance, the young women – not the men - set the rules as they select and reject prospective romantic partners. Which ladies seem interested or uninterested in their dance partners or other male guests? The lady in white (right side, standing) is wearing a golden locket – which other guest is wearing a similar necklace and what does this represent? (left side) How do the issues of class and race feature in the painting and are there more men or women at the party?



B) By the mid 1800's, American women enjoyed rights and privileges which far surpassed those of their female contemporaries across the world. As American women gained the right to own property, a new belief in Separate Spheres placed women as leaders and managers of the household – the Domestic Sphere – with men in the lead outside the home – the Public Sphere. Importantly Americans believed their daughters along with their sons should be educated and have to opportunity to work including the female artist who produced this painting, Lilly Martin Spencer. How is the mother (in blue) portrayed and what is happening with the children and baby? Who is in the background?



C) The Civil War broke the shackles of slavery and with them a centuries-old Southern way of life. In the ruins of the old order, Americans –female and male, black and white and now all free – would to reconstruct the South and negotiate new relationships. In *A Visit from the Old Mistress*, three generations of Freedwomen (former slaves) encounter their former owner for the first time since emancipation. What are the facial expressions and body language of these women? What is the mood the of the visit and why has the old mistress come?

