

USIH Teaching Material and Visual Culture Workshop: Guide to Analyzing Material and Visual Culture Sources

While material and visual culture are two separate fields, methodologies, and sources bases, they share several steps in their analytical processes. As such, we highlight these similarities in this guide, which we hope will allow teachers to more easily and confidently integrate object and image analysis into their teaching. We have also provided a list of some of our favorite online repositories of objects and images, as well as useful resources, at the end of the guide. We suggest teachers choose an object or image for all students to analyze or have smaller groups of students work together on a single object or image.

Please note: students will often be unable to be in the physical presence of an object or image. Thankfully, many museums and databases have virtual galleries and collections, including high-res images and useful meta-data. If we allow ourselves, we can go beyond just seeing the object or image; we can, as Jules David Prown encourages, empathetically experience it, thereby providing the kind of connective experience so many of us feel upon holding and handling primary sources.

Steps

1. Interact

- a. Allow students plenty of time to interact with the object or image (hereafter designated as “o/i”). As they begin, encourage them to approach the o/i with no preconceived notion or assumption of its function, purpose, or meaning. Ask students simply to observe, starting first with the most general aspects of the o/i, then moving to specific details.
 - i. Have students look at the o/i from all possible angles, from different distances (zoom in and out, whether in person or online), in every nook and cranny.
- b. Students should begin to take notes on the o/i, including size, materials, shape, and distinctive elements (such as text, symbols, colors). Have them also identify the various sensory elements of the o/i: what is the color and texture? Does it have any identifying marks or characteristics? How would it feel to the touch? Does it make sound? Would there be a taste or smell to it?
 - i. Other useful questions as they begin to engage with the o/i: Is it (or parts of it) human-made or human-altered? Are there multiple parts to the o/i? How is it oriented? Is there a back, front, sides? Lid, drawers, key holes, etc.?
- c. Students should now be ready to write a description of the o/i. The description should be detailed enough that someone who has never seen the o/i could (in

broad strokes) recreate it. Remind the students to focus on the physicality and visuality of the o/i only, not on its meaning.

- i. Thoroughly describe the object/image, paying careful attention, as relevant, to all of its aspects—material, spatial, and temporal. Be attentive to details, but keep an eye on the big picture. Write in a narrative style, not in dissociated sentences, that reflects a natural movement of the eye. In other words, choose a logical visual route (perhaps starting with the big picture and then moving into details that flow from the top of the object to the bottom, or the left to the right—you decide!) and write your narrative in that way. Describe what you see. Be sure to enjoy the pleasures in close looking—in translating material object/image into narrative description. Remember that the key to good description is a rich, nuanced vocabulary. Use active verbs and descriptive prose.
- ii. Have students share their descriptions. Draw out their shared descriptors, phrases, and identifications by writing them for all to see (blackboard, computer screen on projector, etc.).

2. Respond and Process

- a. After interacting, the next major step is to respond to and process what the students have seen. The goal here is to encourage them to begin to think beyond the physicality of the thing and towards its meaning. We encourage teachers to have this be group work, as the goal is to have students actively listening and learning about the process together. You (the teacher) should function as a neutral mediator or facilitator, guiding the conversation, summarizing what the students say, and making connections between them. Encourage students to let their mind respond to the o/i. Don't make assumptions about it; only respond to what can be proven based on the o/i.
- b. Begin with three big questions*:
 - i. What's going on with/in the object or image?
 1. Some useful questions to consider for an object: How it is used? How does the object interact with human bodies, and vice versa? How does it express itself? Does it prompt some kind of action (individually or socially)?
 2. For an image: Is something (an event, person, idea, allegory) being depicted in the image?
 3. For both objects and images: How does the o/i make you feel? What emotions does the o/i evoke for the viewer (specifically for you)?
 - ii. What do you see that makes you say that?
 1. What material or visual evidence do you have to suggest that? What in or about the o/i brings those thoughts and feelings out?

2. Student responses will be subjective and personal. The hard part is making them articulate *why* they respond in that way--what the material or visual reasons are for it.
- iii. What more can we find?
 1. Encourage other students to participate, to add to the conversation.
- c. They should also process the o/i through documenting its life-cycle, from design to destruction. (This kind of information is often provided in the object label/metadata and provenance, typically available online.)
 - i. Who created the o/i? When? Where?
 - ii. Who purchased or used it? When? Where?
 - iii. Where did it live its life? In a house (what room)? In a museum (what gallery)?
 - iv. Is it still extant? Where is it now? Who owns it?
3. Speculate
 - a. It is now time for students to speculate about the larger meaning of the o/i. Using all the information and responses to the o/i thus far, have students hypothesize about the function and meaning of the o/i on various levels: individual, group, and society.
 - i. This process can also be called “layering”: layer the different components and characteristics of the o/i to help pinpoint ideas that it conveys.
 - ii. For instance, does the o/i seem to express or create individual and/or group identity (e.g., class, race, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, nationality, religious affiliation)?
 - iii. There is no single “right” speculation. The goal is to get students thinking about the possibilities, which they will then test by seeking out corroborating evidence. There *are* answers, but they must first be willing to offer *potential* answers before they get there.
 - b. As students speculate, ask them to consider how they might go about proving their hypothesis. What kinds of other primary and secondary sources could they consult?
 - c. Have students share two to three speculations and where they’d go for answers.
4. Connect
 - a. Lastly, it’s time to connect the o/i with bigger topics and issues.
 - i. What themes, events, people, and ideas that you’ve studied thus far in class relate to the o/i?
 1. Do multiple student speculations connect to one or two themes? What kind of connections can you draw between speculations?
 - ii. What specifically can the o/i reveal about those topics that you haven’t seen thus far?

- iii. What are some historical questions that the o/i, and its many connections, suggest?
- b. Encourage students to think more broadly about methodology and source bases. What can the o/i reveal to you about history that other primary sources cannot? What are the limitations?
- c. Have students share some of their connections; in the process, students will recognize further connections they can make.

Though we end our guide with connecting, this is not the last step in material and visual culture studies. With analyses in hand, students can go on to the research, interpretation, and writing phases, which in some ways more closely mirror that of “traditional” historical scholarship. The research, though, will require reading in multiple disciplines (art history, archaeology, and architectural history, to name a few), and the creation of diverse primary source assemblages (not just text but more objects and images). Throughout the process, it will be necessary to go back to various points of analysis. This guide, then, is not perfectly linear. As necessary, students should loop back to interacting or responding or processing if they get stuck or have a new idea.

*One useful exercise here is the “adjectives exercise” (Exercises for the Quiet Eye, ©Annie VF Storr, 2011/2015/2017/2019):

1. Make a list of ten adjectives that come to mind when you look at this work. (This helps them identify what’s actually happening with/in the o/i.)
2. Circle the three that seem to encapsulate the image for you the most.
3. Draw a line at the point where the list of adjectives stopped coming to you naturally, and felt a bit far-fetched or strained. (This helps students recognize the difference between the o/i leading them to a statement and their jumping to conclusions without evidence.)
4. Ask for volunteers to give their list of ten and three. (This will encourage students to see that there are multiple answers to these questions, and thus always more to find in an o/i!)

Digital Collections and Repositories

The Smithsonian (<https://www.si.edu/collections>)

Metropolitan Museum of Art (<https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection>)

Winterthur Museum (<http://museumcollection.winterthur.org/>)

Artstor (<https://www.artstor.org/>)

ThingStor (<https://sites.udel.edu/thingstor/>)

Library of Congress (<https://www.loc.gov/>)

William J. Hill Texas Artisans and Artists Archive (<https://texasartisans.mfah.org/>)

Museum of Early Southern Decorative Arts (<https://mesda.org/collections/mesda-collection/>)

The American Antiquarian Society’s digital asset database, GIGI (<https://gigi.mwa.org/>)

The Library Company of Philadelphia's Digital Collections
(<https://digital.librarycompany.org/discovery>)

Resources

Debby Andrews, Sarah Carter, Estella Chung, Ellen Garvey, Shirley Wajda, and Catherine Whalen, "Twenty Questions to Ask An Object," revised based on feedback from the workshop "Twenty Years, Twenty Questions to Ask an Object," conducted by the Material Culture Caucus of American Studies Association at the ASA's 2014 annual meeting,
<https://networks.h-net.org/twenty-questions-ask-object-handout>.

Facing History and Ourselves, "Teaching Strategies,"
<https://www.facinghistory.org/resource-library/teaching-strategies>. [Tip: search for image analysis]

Elizabeth Humphrey, "Visual Thinking Strategies Overview," document provided by author.

Johnson Museum of Art, "Visual Analysis 101,"
<http://museum.cornell.edu/sites/default/files/HFJ%20Visual%20Analysis%20101.pdf>.

Ann Smart Martin and J. Ritchie Garrison, eds., *American Material Culture: The Shape of the Field* (Wilmington, DE: Winterthur Museum, 1997).

Jules David Prown, "Mind in Matter: An Introduction to Material Culture Theory and Method," *Winterthur Portfolio* 17, no. 1 (Spring, 1982), 1–19.

Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, Ivan Gaskell, Sara Schechner, and Sarah Anne Carter, *Tangible Things: Making History Through Objects* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015).

Daniel Waugh, "Material Culture/Objects," *World History Sources*,
<https://chnm.gmu.edu/worldhistorysources/unpacking/objectsmain.html>.

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