

Connecting Cultures and Time Periods

by Sophia



WHAT'S COVERED

Many connections exist between art history and different cultures and time periods. Visual arts often provide another way for people to learn from and connect to the past. In this lesson, you will learn that:

1. [Works of Art Are Visual Records of the Past](#)
2. [Works of Art Create Emotional Connections](#)

1. Works of Art Are Visual Records of the Past

Works of art provide a visual record of the past. Whereas documents tell us about what happened in the past, works of art both illustrate events from the past and express past attitudes and beliefs. In all instances, we need to use critical thinking to determine the value of both documents and works of art as historical sources.

➦ **EXAMPLE** Take a look at this image. It's one thing to read about George Washington crossing the Delaware River to confront the British during the Revolutionary War, but quite another to view an image of it.



Emanuel Leutze (1816–1868)

Washington Crossing the Delaware

New York, New York, USA

1951

Oil on canvas

Written documents tell a much different story than what you see here. Many of the soldiers were freezing or near starving. They were demoralized and in need of a victory that could swing some wavering support for the Continental Army their way. The artist that painted this took liberties to project an idealized crossing of the Delaware River as a way of commemorating the event 75 years after it happened and also recognizing George Washington's image as a national hero.

We might consider the concept of primary sources here. A **primary source** is a document or work of art that was created at the same time as a historic event. Letters that revolutionary soldiers wrote in 1776 describing how cold and starving they were are primary sources for the Revolutionary War. A painting completed in 1851 is not a primary source for the Revolutionary War, but it is a primary source in analyzing attitudes regarding the war and images of the Founding Fathers in the decades that followed.



HINT

It's important to use critical thinking when analyzing works of art, especially in considering them as primary sources. Quite often, works of art represent an ideal, how things could be or should be, according to specific points of view. In order to better understand the meaning behind works of art, we might think back to the questions asked in the lesson on decolonization:

- Whose point of view/story is being told?
- Who benefits from the telling of these stories?

When we ask ourselves these questions, we begin to see that all works of art express specific points of view rather than a universal "truth."

The story told through historic documentation (the troops were starving and freezing to death) versus the painting (George Washington was a heroic leader) are different, but one is no less "true" than another. They both accurately express the "realities" of their time periods, which changed a lot over the course of 75 years. For this reason, it may be important to use both works of art and documentation to determine how values change over time. Works of art often provide visual evidence that is not clearly expressed through text.



TERM TO KNOW

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2. Works of Art Create Emotional Connections

One of the most important aspects of a work of art, at least in a historical context, is how it allows people to make those emotional connections with the past. An aesthetic experience is engaging and can be very influential, in some ways more influential than written communication. You might not think critically about what you are taking in. Instead, you just let it happen. Studying the visual arts can also help you appreciate the values, aspirations, and aspects of other **cultures** that would otherwise be difficult or impossible to find accessible with written documents alone.

⇒ **EXAMPLE** Works of art can foster emotional connections to events in history, such as this painting by Francisco Goya, a Spanish painter.



Francisco Goya (1746 - 1828)

The Third of May 1908

Madrid, Spain

1914

Oil on canvas

The scene takes place during the French occupation of Spain under Napoleon and shows French soldiers executing some Spanish men. Notice how Goya depicts the soldiers as rigid, almost mechanized figures, versus the chaotic mess of the bodies on the left entwined with those people that are about to be executed. When viewing this painting, you might focus on the figure in white holding his hands up with the kind of pained expression on his face. This might create an emotional connection between the viewer and the painting.



TERM TO KNOW

Culture

The arts and other manifestations of human intellectual production.



SUMMARY

You can learn about and connect to the past through visual arts. Often there is a great deal of information about history embedded in certain works. **Works of art are visual records of the past;** sometimes these works interpret the past, and other times they complement written documents. Additionally, **works of art can create emotional connections** between that piece of work and the viewer. In this lesson, you looked at works of art that might evoke an emotional connection.

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