

Criteria for Selecting Representative Art or Artists

Introduction

Art is one type of primary source useful to historians. Often, historians pay particular attention to works of art or to artists they believe represent a certain period in history. That means that the art or artist conveys important ideas or information about a period.

Consider one example—woodblock prints. Woodblock prints are often regarded as representing the Tokugawa period (1603-1868) in Japanese history. Why? Woodblock prints developed as a Japanese art form during that period. They convey a lot of information about life during the period. They were cheaply reproduced using new printing technology better than what was available in Europe at the time. Woodblock prints were very popular, reaching even people who were not wealthy. Because so many people owned and enjoyed the prints, they played a role in unifying the Japanese people. Depiction of landmarks like Mount Fuji in numerous woodblock prints made those landmarks symbols of a shared culture. Thus, the prints not only reflected the culture of the time, they helped shape it.

Directions

Imagine that you are a historian who has just been hired by a curriculum publisher. The publisher is developing lessons to teach high school students about different countries through their arts. The publisher explains that the purpose of the series is to provide insights into several historic periods in each country. There will be one lesson for each time period. Your task is to develop the criteria to use in choosing the works of art or artists that will be featured in each lesson. The work of art or artist should represent or provide insights into the time period in that country. The criteria you develop should be general enough that they can be used as tools in choosing art or artists for all the countries and historical periods in this series of lessons.

On the chart on the next page are some criteria or guidelines that might be used in choosing works of art or artists to represent historic time periods. In a small group, go over the list of criteria; if your group can think of others that are not listed, add them to the table. Then discuss each criterion's strengths and weaknesses. Then choose the five that seem most useful to the members of your group. Write those five below so that you can use them later.

Criteria Our Group Thinks Are Most Useful

Criteria	Reasons to Use This Criterion	Reasons Not to Use This Criterion
Fame		
Popularity (Who liked it—many people or an important few? Has its popularity lasted?)		
Beauty		
Value (as reflected in sale price)		
Influence on Other Art or Artists		
Influence on Society		
Subject Matter that Represents Historical Events or Culture		
Subject Matter that Reflects Cultural Values		
Created/Reproduced via New Technologies or Ones that Embody Enduring Elements of the Culture		

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