

How to describe an image: Tips for creating Titles, Descriptions and Subject headings

- **Remember your audience.** Pictures mean different things to different users. Users of your collection may include historians, teachers and students, illustrators, architects, designers and hobbyists, collectors and curators of various objects, and librarians, to name a few. Take into account the many users that may interact with your collection and try to create descriptions and subject headings that will be useful to a wide range of users.

For example, how might a painter, an art historian, a social historian, a botanist and obtain different (but not incompatible) information from this painting?

What different uses might they have for this painting?



What terms would they use to describe what they see?

- **Be aware of your biases and assumptions.** Image analysis represents the subjective bias of the indexer – their own prior knowledge and set of cultural assumptions. This is especially important when describing images representing cultures that are not your own, or time periods that we know little about or are removed from. Be attentive to what values are communicated in the words you use. Be aware that gestures or actions represented in an image from another time period may have different meanings or connotations than they do today.
- It may be helpful to take a systematic approach to describing an image. Including a **Factual** description (what the image is *of*), using terms that are both specific and generic, as well as an **Expressional** description (what the image is *about*).

Two Approaches to Description/Subject Analysis	
Factual - What the image is <i>of</i>?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use words that describe people, places, objects, conditions, actions that have a physical manifestation • Words can be <i>Specific</i> (ie. the Golden Gate Bridge) or <i>Generic</i> (bridge, architecture)
Expressional - What this image is <i>about</i>?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use words that capture the symbolic meanings and abstract concepts. • A description of the mood of the picture • Words that describe emotions (love, sorrow) or concepts (truth, honor)



Describing an image: an image analysis checklist

	Factual - Generic	Factual - Specific	Expressional (About)
Who	Who or what being or objects is this picture of, generically? ie: bridge, architecture	Who or what being or objects is this picture of, specifically? ie: the Golden Gate Bridge	Do the beings and/or objects stand as symbols for other beings or objects? Do they personify or symbolize an idea, or represent an abstraction? What are they about?
What	What are the creatures or objects in the picture doing, generally? ie: football game	Specific. What are the creatures or objects in the picture doing, specifically? ie: Rose Bowl, 1980.	What is their condition or state of being? What emotions are conveyed by these actions or conditions? What abstract ideas do these actions or conditions symbolize? ie: competition, rivalry
Where	Where is the picture in space? This could include, geographic, cosmographic, architectural terms to identify the locale, site, place of picture. ie: cityscape, interior, planet, jungle	Where is the picture of, specifically? ie: New York City, Mars, Los Angeles.	Does the locale of the picture symbolize a different or mythical place? Does it represent an abstract thought (ie: paradise) ie: <i>Renaissance art</i> . A cityscape (factual - generic) intended to symbolize Jerusalem (expressional) and is actually Paris (factual - specific).
When	Where is the picture in time, generally? This refers to cyclical or recurring time. ie: Spring, night	Where is the picture in time, specifically? This refers to linear time, such as a specific date or time period. ie: June 1885, Reconstruction	Is the element of time represented in a picture a manifestation of an abstract idea? A symbol or personification? ie: Father Time

Handout based on "Analyzing the Subject of a picture: a theoretical approach" by Sara Shatford, *Cataloging and Classification Quarterly* 6:3 (Spring 1986): 39-61.

