ENGAGING GRADES 6-8 WITH {SANCTUARY}
Building Historical Perspective

In this lesson, students will look at the work of Rashid Rana and the idea that history, like a narrative, can be told from a number of different personal, political, and social perspectives.

A comparative look at the works of artists Marcos Ramírez ERRE and Jamal Cyrus will open an opportunity for students to consider the importance of looking critically at their sources of information.
Students will investigate primary and secondary sources of information, consider the implications of historic perspectivism in art, and evaluate content presented in diverse media and formats.

A Research Guide to Primary and Secondary Sources

The materials, evidence, or data used in any form of research are known as sources. These are typically classified into two broad categories: primary and secondary.

Primary Sources

A primary source provides direct evidence about an event, object, person, or work of art. Characteristically, primary sources are firsthand and in-the-moment accounts. Examples include, personal diaries and letters, works of art and literature, newspapers, and audio recordings.

Secondary Sources

A secondary source lacks the immediacy of a primary record. It is often based on a primary source. As material produced after an event, it contains information that has been interpreted, analyzed, or processed in such a way that it is no longer firsthand. History textbooks, dictionaries, encyclopedias, interpretive journal articles, and book reviews are all examples of secondary sources.
Rashid Rana's design for Sanctuary, titled Familial Unfamiliar 2, is drawn from his ongoing Transliteration series. It features a Western masterwork juxtaposed with a contemporary photo of refugees adrift on open water and facing an uncertain future. His careful rearrangement of both images disorients the viewer and creates an alluring abstraction, but closer inspection exposes the contrasts between the painting's idealized gentry and the photograph's reluctant migrants. “By taking European paintings and rearranging their fragments, I'm trying to see the possibilities beyond that one particular image, and free them from a specific time and place,” Rana explains. “By transliterating them, we liberate ourselves and see beyond their original contextual frameworks.”
Taking a Historical Perspective

Taking historical perspective means understanding the social, cultural, intellectual, and emotional settings that shaped people’s lives and actions in the past. It involves having empathy for these people and understanding how and why our thinking has shifted over time. Rashid’s work explores this on a number of levels.

Discussion Points

• What is going on in this artwork? What do you see that makes you say that?

• What are the two sources of images in this artwork? How are they different?

• What are the two different stories that this work is combining? Why has the artist chosen to present these stories woven together in this way? How do the stories relate to one another?

• What words would you use to describe how the artist has portrayed Europeans in this work? Why did you choose those particular words? What words would you use to describe the way the artist has portrayed the refugees in this artwork? Why did you choose those words?

• Do you think there are primary and secondary sources of information in this work? Explain your thoughts.
Reading a Source

Another element of building historical perspective is learning to read a source of information. Historians treasure the paper trail of history—letters, documents, diaries, drawings, newspaper accounts, and other records. These are primary sources. Historians learn to read these sources to unlock their secrets. Primary sources must be read differently. To use them well, we must set them in their historical contexts in order to better understand what was going on when they were created.

Sanctuary artists Jamal Cyrus and Marcos Ramírez ERRE explore and question sources of information and ask you to consider how to validate them.

Jamal Cyrus
b. 1973, United States

Jamal Cyrus’s Sanctuary design, titled X-plane, explores the notion of sacred ground. It begins with a rubbing the artist made of the sidewalk outside New York’s Audubon Ballroom, a cultural monument from early-20th-century Harlem and the place where black rights leader Malcolm X was assassinated in 1965. Cyrus overlays the rubbing with imagery of the first page of Malcolm X’s FBI file, an unremarkable institutional form displaying only bits of code and procedural information, and marred by redactions. The artist likens the geometric structure of the form to a building plan, explaining, “From this perspective the document becomes the representation of a three-dimensional space—in this case an archive, a reservoir of information, knowledge, and possibly enlightenment; a place where reading is done ritualistically, and new insights beyond the two-dimensional plane are revealed.”
A native Mexican who moved to the United States as a young adult, Marcos Ramírez ERRE quite naturally gravitated toward issues related to his two homes, from Mexican alliances with foreign oil companies to the United States’ accession of vast expanses of Mexican land. His investigations into identity, community, and a sense of belonging are fueled by his own experiences as an immigrant but not limited to them; the borders he examines are more broadly economic, cultural, and aesthetic. Like all of his works, his Sanctuary design is aesthetically straightforward but conceptually complicated, acknowledging an era when access to information is more widespread than ever but questions of accuracy taint its consumption and reinforce audiences’ existing perspectives rather than bridging new ones. Writing about the rug, ERRE notes, “Most of the time you have to descend into the darkest voids to be able to mine for the most precious prizes.”

Marcos Ramírez ERRE
b. 1961, Mexico

Discussion Notes

- Are either of these works examples of information from a primary or secondary source? What makes you say that?

- Can you see the artist’s point of view in either of these works? What are the messages they are trying to share? How have they used text and images to share these messages with you? Does the text or image have more than one meaning? Explain your ideas.

- Does everyone in your group see these works in the same way? How might these works have been viewed in the 1950s? In 50 years from now?

- How do you personally decide what to believe when you receive information online, in print, or on TV? Do you think you could spot fake news? How?

- Can you create a “fake news” story that connects these two works and share it with the group?
Review and Extension Materials

Assessment

Are students building on one another’s explorations and conversation points?

Can they assimilate their own and the group’s discussion about historic and personal narrative when looking at or making art?

Are they able to critically assess an artwork as a source of information?

Have they taken on another’s perspective and shown empathy?

Final Assessment and Take-Away Extension

Can students articulate an idea of what sanctuary means to them?

Can they incorporate a symbol (image or text) into an idea, thought, or feeling in any new ways?

Are they able to look critically at an image or text?

Do they have a sense of how to question a source of information?

Read

Vincent and Theo: The Van Gogh Brothers by Deborah Heiligman

An art history story that uses primary and secondary sources of information. Meticulously researched, drawing on the 658 letters Vincent wrote to Theo during his lifetime, the book presents a tale of two lives intertwined and the extraordinary love of the Van Gogh brothers.