
2 3-5 (aim for 5) page research papers & class presentations on works of art from posted lists of works primarily from the Museum of Fine Arts or Davis Museum, Wellesley.

For the traditional work – I would like you to respond, draw, and verbally describe it. What do you see, or think you see? What does it mean to you? You should do this before you do any reading. In your detailed visual description of the object, you should include dimensions, materials, shape, textures, colors, proportions, subject matter and so on. I have given you basic culture areas or artists’ names for the works, and you can locate specific information in the MFA catalogue, Black Womanhood Catalogue, googling, and/or talking to me. You should compare the target work with objects published in books, read about it and the culture that produced it, and use your artwork to tell the story of its culture.

Your paper should address the question how this piece expresses cultural meaning in a visual way [i.e. symbolism of shape, color, design, texture, materials, handling during use or during ritual, patterns of wear based on handling]. How does your piece compares to other works of the same type from the same culture? This means finding other examples in the published literature. Is there a great deal of variation across comparable works? What does that variation signify?

You should then segue from the close-up on the work of art to the larger cultural context -- incorporating information on the people who made the work, where they live, their lifestyle, belief system, and how they used the object in question. Every work will not completely illuminate its culture, but you would be surprised how much of a window each one can be.

For your presentation in powerpoint: The Work you are looking at, a map locating the country and culture, a context illustration (where you tell how it was used), comparisons with other works of the same type and a discussion of why there are similarities and differences, other possible comparisons depend upon the particular piece chosen.

Sources and ideas (including those taken from the label) must be cited using the social science citation form (author surname, date, page in parentheses in the text) with full citations in the bibliography. Image sources must be cited as well.

To pull together a good bibliography: Use the bibliographies in your respective text books for sources. Use ethnic group name, artist’s name (if known), object type name in the vernacular (if commonly used in the literature), the names of authors who have studied this group as keywords. Use FLO to find books and
JSTOR to find articles. You have access to all the books you could possibly need through the MFA library network. Also consult Smithsonian Institute Libraries On-Line Catalogue www.siris.si.edu. Author names work best here as keywords. In constructing your working bibliography -- I would suggest a minimum of 6 strong sources (that means something titled ‘African Art’ may not be adequate). Put the page references in that address your work if the title of the book, article, does not make it clear). At least half your sources should be paper-based and not web-sites (but that doesn’t mean you can’t access them on-line). Wikipedia is not a good source. Check out the sources for any article on Wikipedia and go back to the original. Websites that simply digest the material for you are also not acceptable sources -- go back to the original sources. Websites that present original material may be good sources and certainly, the web is a good place to find some comparative imagery (although there’s a lot of low quality African carving illustrated on the Web -- that’s a major difference between it and good publications – the quality of the works illustrated.)

The paper on a contemporary artist/work differs somewhat since you will be looking more specifically at the artist’s biography and intent as well as the political and artistic milieu in which the work was made. A description of the piece and your response is to the work should be your beginning, but your approach will vary because the nature of the works is quite different from the traditional works you have been looking at. However, a paper of this kind is probably more familiar too you than a paper on sculpture from another culture.

Information on research techniques and bibliography hold across both papers. One significant advantage in working with a living, and possibly locally resident or visiting artist, is that you might actually be able to talk to the artist. The artist, however, should not be your only source. An interview provides a lot of ‘wow’ in a paper/presentation.

You must contextualize the artist, as you did with the traditional art work, in a cultural context. No artist works in isolation, even if the contemporary African artist is concerned with personal expression and the traditional African artist with a more general cultural expression.

See the instructions on the template for each type of paper because the powerpoint templates provide you with a structure for the paper as well as the presentation. If you have questions, contact me by email or come and see me in the office – but email is 24/7 and office time much more limited. Don’t wait a week to get your questions answered!

[Traditional Work Template] [Contemporary Artist/Work Template]