

## Activity: "What is a Primary Source?"

### 1) Writing Exercise

**Objective:** Students learn the difference between a primary source and a secondary source. They learn that works of art can be primary sources and can provide a window into another historical time period. This activity specifically addresses *History and Social Science Analysis Skills, Grades K-6: Research, Evidence, and Point of View Skills*.

- Students differentiate between primary and secondary sources
- Students pose relevant questions about events they encounter in historical documents, eyewitness accounts, oral histories, letters, diaries, artifacts, photographs, maps, artworks, and architecture.

#### Materials:

- Image of Ferdinand Deppe's painting, *Mission San Gabriel* (Doc A)
- Primary/Secondary Source Worksheet (Doc B)
- Primary and Secondary Sources to help interpret painting (Doc C)
- Grade Level Reader (Doc D) or Advanced Reader (Doc E)

#### Directions:

- Discuss the differences between primary sources and secondary sources (definitions below).
- Have the students fill out the Primary Source/Secondary Source worksheet (attached below)
- Ask students **to pick a person** in the Deppe painting and write a paragraph or two about what they think that person's life might be like. Ask students to explain what they wrote down, either in pairs or by themselves.

#### OR

- Ask students to imagine **what kind of story** the Deppe painting conveys. Have students write a paragraph or two expressing their point of view, using specific details in the painting as evidence. Point out the various types of clothing and action scenes in different parts of the painting.

**A primary source** provides direct or firsthand evidence about a time period, an event, object, person or work of art. Primary sources include historical and legal accounts, eyewitness accounts, experiments, statistical data, creative writing, audio and video recordings, speeches and art objects.

**A secondary source** is a book article or newspaper that describes, interprets, or analyzes primary sources. It is not from the time period in which the primary source was created or produced.<sup>1</sup>

#### Teacher's Background Comments on the Painting:

The *Mission San Gabriel* painting by Ferdinand Deppe shows Alta California in a time of transition. Only the Spanish mayordomo (supervisor) is shown in western dress. All other males are portrayed

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<sup>1</sup> Ithaca Library, "Primary and Secondary Sources," Ithaca College.  
<https://library.ithaca.edu/sp/subjects/primary>

as not having yet converted to Spanish ways and hence Spanish dress. It thus shows the Indian men as somehow “late” or recalcitrant in some way. On the other hand, all female Indians are shown as having converted and wearing western dress: skirts and blouses. This shows them as amenable to the so-called “civilized” ways, marriageable by future settlers. There is a foreign trader in the blue and white clothing, talking to the father of the mission. This person is most likely a hide and tallow trader from the East Coast.

## **Activity 2) Play the game of “telephone”**

**Objective:** To show how an original message (primary source) becomes skewed and distorted, the more people that get involved to interpret it (secondary source).

### **Target Standards:**

#### **California History-Social Science Standards**

4.2.5 Describe the daily lives of the people, native and nonnative, who occupied the presidios, missions, ranchos and pueblos

#### **California Visual Arts Content Standards**

Page 57: Connecting the visual arts and California history, they can discuss the content of artworks created by artists from various cultures.

#### **3.2 Historical and Cultural Context / Diversity of the Visual Arts**

Identify and discuss the content of works of art in the past and present, focusing on different cultures that have contributed to California’s history and art heritage.

#### **California History-Social Science Standards -- Framework**

#77 Who lived in California?

#74 When and how did California grow?